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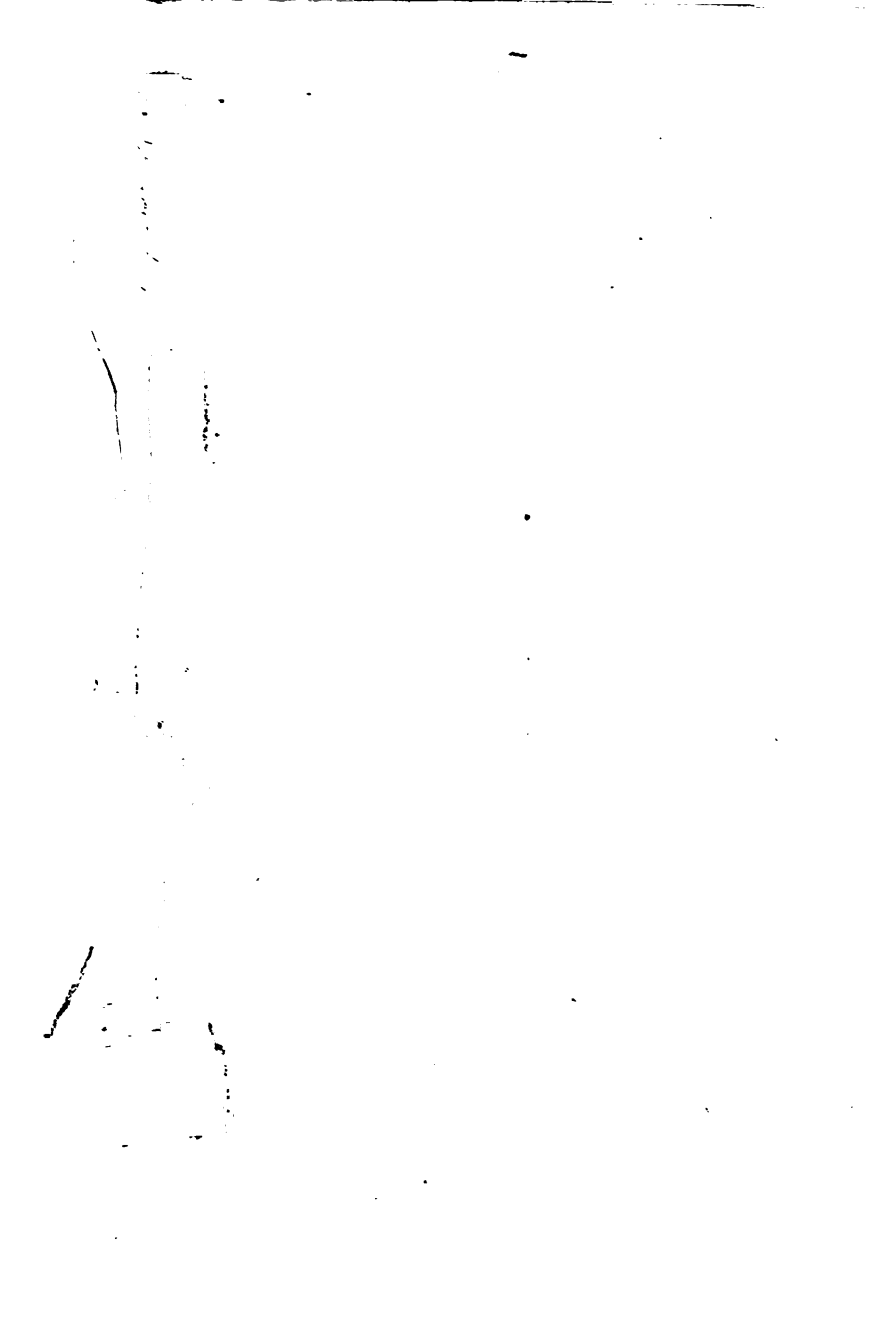
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IN THE NAME OF A WOMAN

CHAPTER I

A NIGHT ADVENTURE IN SOFIA

"HELP!"

The cry, faint but strenuous, in a woman's voice, rang out on the heavy hot night air, and told me that one of those abominable deeds that were so rife in the lawless Bulgarian capital was in progress, and I hastened forward in angry perplexity trying to locate the sound.

I knew what it meant. I had been strolling late through the hot, close streets between the Park and the Cathedral, when a woman closely hooded had hurried past me, dogged by a couple of skulking, scuttling spies, and I had turned to follow them. Across the broad Cathedral Square I had lost sight of them, and, taking at random one of the streets on the opposite side of the square, I was walking and listening for some sound to guide me in their direction.

"Help!" came the cry again, this time close to me from behind a pair of large wooden gates, one of which stood ajar. I pushed it open and crossed the courtyard before a large house, loosening as I ran the blade of the sword-stick I carried. The house was in darkness in the front, and as I dashed round to the

back the cry was uttered for the third time, while I caught the sounds of struggling.

There was a light in one of the lower rooms, the long casement window of which stood partly open, and the beams came straggling in a thin line between some nearly closed curtains. With a spring I caught the ledge, and, drawing up my head level with the window, looked in.

What I saw told me that my worst fears were being realised. The woman who had passed me in the street was struggling with frantic effort to hold the door of the room against someone who was fighting to get in. Her cloak was off, and her head and face uncovered. She was a tall, lithe, strenuous creature, obviously of great strength and determination, and the whiteness of the face, now set and resolute, was thrown up into the strongest contrast by a mass of bright red hair, some of which the fierceness of the struggle had loosened. She was striving and straining with enormous energy, despite the fact that she was bleeding badly from a wound somewhere in the shoulder or upper arm.

As I glanced in, she turned her head in my direction with the look of a tigress at bay; and I guessed that she was calculating the possibilities of escape by means of the window. But the momentary relaxation of her resistance gave the men a better chance, and, to my horror, I saw one of them get his arm in and slash and thrust at her with his knife.

She answered with a greater effort of her own, however, and succeeded in jamming the man's arm between the door and the lintel, making him cry out with an oath that reached me.

But so unequal a struggle could only end in one

way, and that very speedily unless I intervened ; so I scrambled on to the window ledge, and with a cry leapt into the room. At the noise of my appearance, mistaking me no doubt for a third ruffian come to attack her, the woman's courage gave out ; she uttered a cry of despair and rushed away to a corner of the room. She released the door so suddenly that the two men came staggering and blundering into the room, almost falling, and I recognised them as the two rascals I had seen following her.

"Have no fear, madame ; I am here to help you," I said, and, before the two ruffians had recovered from the surprise of my appearance, I was upon them. One could not stop his rush till he was close to me, and, having him at this disadvantage, I crashed my fist into his face with a tremendous blow, knocking him down with such force that his head fell with a heavy thud against the floor, and his dagger flew out of his hand and spun clattering across the room almost to the feet of the woman.

The second was more wary, but in a trice I whipped out my sword, held him at bay, and vowed in stern, ringing tones that I would run him through the body if he wasn't outside the room in a brace of seconds. I saw him flinch. He had no stomach for this kind of fight, and he was giving way before me when a cry from the man I had knocked down drew our attention.

The woman, seeing her chance, had picked up the rascal's dagger, and with the light of murder in her eyes, was stealing upon the fallen man.

Instantly I sprang between her and him.

"No, no, madame ; no bloodshed !" I cried to her ; and then to the men, "Be off, while your skins are whole !" The words were not out of my lips before

the unarmed man had already reached the door in full flight, and his companion, seeing I meant to act only on the defensive, and recognising the uselessness of any further attack, followed him, though less precipitately.

"Why did you stop me killing such a brute?" cried the woman angrily, her eyes blazing. "They both meant to murder me, and would have done it if you had not come. They had earned death."

"But I did not come to play the butcher," I answered somewhat sternly, repelled by her indifference to bloodshed.

"Follow them and kill them now!" she cried vindictively. "Do you hear? Kill them before they carry the story of this rescue to their masters;" and in her frenzy she took hold of my arm and shook it, urging me toward the door.

"Better see to your wound," I returned, as I sheathed my sword.

"Bah, you are mad! I have no patience with you!" She shrugged her shoulders as though I were little better than a contemptible coward, and walked to the end of the room and stood in the lamplight half turned away from me.

The pose revealed to me the full majestic grace of her form, while the profile of her face, as thrown into half shadow by the rather dim light of the room, set me wondering. It was not a beautiful face. The features, nose and mouth especially, were too large, the cheek bones too high, the colour too pale; but it was a face full of such power and strength and resource that it compelled your admiration and silenced your critical judgment. A woman to be remarked anywhere.

But when she turned her eyes upon me a moment

later, they seemed to rivet me with an indescribable and irresistible fascination. In striking contrast to the rich red hair and the pale skin, the eyes were as black as night. The iris almost as dark as the pupil, the white opalescent in its clearness, and fringed with lashes and brows of deep brown. She caught my gaze on her, and held it with a look so intense that I could scarcely turn away.

Her bosom was heaving, and her breath coming and going quickly with her exertions and excitement, and after a moment, without saying a word, she threw herself into a low chair and hid her face in her hands.

Who could she be? That she was a woman of station was manifest. The richness of her dress, the appointments of the room, told this plainly, even if her mien and carriage had not proclaimed it; and yet she seemed alone in the house. It was a position of considerable embarrassment, and for the moment I did not know what to do.

I had no wish to be mixed up in any such intrigue as was clearly at the bottom of this business; and though I was glad to have saved her life, I was anxious to be gone before any further developments should involve me in unpleasant consequences.

There was no more dangerous hornet's nest of intrigue and conspiracy than Sofia to be found in Europe at that time, and the secret mission which had brought me to the city about a fortnight before was more than enough to tax all my energies and power, without any such additional complication as this adventure seemed to promise. My object was to get to the bottom of the secret machinations by which Russia was endeavouring to close her grip of iron on the throne and country of Bulgaria, and, if possible, thwart them;

and I had been trying and testing by every secret means at my command to find a path that would lead me to my end. It must be a delicate and dangerous task enough under the best auspices, but if I were to be embarrassed now by the coils of any private vengeance feud, I ran a good chance of being baffled completely.

Even before this night the difficulties in my way had appeared as hopeless as the perils were inevitable ; and I had felt as a man might feel who had resolved to stay the progress of a railway train by laying his head on the metals. But if this affair were as deadly as it seemed, I might find my head struck off before even the train came in sight.

Yet to leave such a woman in this helpless plight was the act of a coward, and not to be thought of for a moment ; and I stood looking at her in sheer perplexity and indecision.

She lay back in her seat for some minutes, making no attempt to call assistance, not even taking her hands from her face, and paying no heed whatever to her wound, the blood from which had stained her dress.

I roused myself at length, and, feeling the sheer necessity of doing something, went to the door and called loudly for the servants.

"It is useless to call ; there is no one in the house," she said, her voice now trembling slightly ; and with a deep sigh she rose from her chair, and after a moment's pause crossed the room to me. She fixed her eyes upon my face ; her look had changed from that of the vengeful Fury who had repelled me with her violent recklessness of passion to one of ineffable sweetness, tenderness, and gratitude. Out of her eyes had died down all the wildness, and what remained charmed and thrilled me, until I felt myself almost constrained

to throw myself at her feet in eagerness to do whatever she bade me.

"You will think me an ingrate, or a miser of my thanks, sir," she said in a tone rich and soft; "and yet, believe me, my heart is full of gratitude."

"Please say no more," I replied, with a wave of the hand; "but tell me, can I be of any further service? Your wound—can I not get you assistance?"

She paid no heed to the question, but remained gazing steadfastly into my eyes. Then her face broke into a smile that transfigured it until it seemed to glow with a quite radiant beauty.

"Yes, indeed, you can serve me—if you will; but not only in the manner you think. The servants have deserted the house. I am alone to-night—alone and quite in your power." She lingered on the words, paused, and then added: "But in the power of a man of honour."

"How can I serve you? You have but to ask."

"I wish I could think that," was the quick answer, with a flash from her eyes. "But first for this," and she rapidly bared the wound, revealing an arm and shoulder of surpassing beauty of form. "Can you bind this up?" For the moment I was amazed at this complete abandonment of all usual womanly reserve. The action was deliberate, however, and I read it as at once a sign of her trust and confidence in me, and a test of my honour. The hurt was not serious. The man's blade had pierced the soft white flesh of the shoulder, but had not penetrated deep; and I had no difficulty in staunching the blood and binding it up.

"It is not a serious wound," I said reassuringly. "I am glad."

"That is no fault of the dastard who struck at me. It was aimed at my heart."

She showed not the least embarrassment, but appeared bent on making me feel that she trusted me as implicitly as a child. When I had bound up the wound she resumed her dress, taking care to put the stains of blood out of sight; and then, with a few swift, graceful movements, for all the stiffness of the hurt, she coiled up the loose tresses of her hair.

When she had finished she went to a cabinet, and, taking wine and glasses, filled them.

"You will pledge me?" and she looked the invitation. "We women are so weak. I am beginning to feel the reaction."

I was putting the glass to my lips when she stopped me.

"Stay, I wish to know to whom I owe my life?"

So powerful was the strange influence she exerted that I was on the point of blurting out the truth, that I was Gerald Winthrop, an Englishman, when I steadied my scrambled wits, and, mindful of my secret mission in the country and of the part I was playing, I replied:

"I am the Count Benderoff, of Radova."

She saw the hesitation, but put it down to a momentary reluctance to disclose my identity, for she answered:

"You will not repent having trusted me with your name, Count." Then, with a flashing, subtle underglance, she added, "And do you know me?"

"As yet, madame, I have not that honour, to my regret."

"Yet I am not unknown in Bulgaria," and she raised her head with a gesture of infinite pride.

"I am a stranger in Sofia," said I, in excuse of my ignorance.

"Even strangers know of the staunch woman-friend of his Highness the Prince. I am the Countess Anna Bokara."

I knew her well enough by repute, and her presence in the house alone and defenceless was the more mystifying.

"Permit me to wish you a speedy recovery from your wound, Countess," and to cover the thoughts which her words started I raised my glass. She seemed almost to caress me with her eyes and voice as she replied :

"I drink to my newest friend, that rare thing in this distracted country, a man of honour, the Count Benderoff, of Radova." As she set her glass down she added : "My enemies have done me a splendid service, Count—they have brought me your friendship. They could not have made us a nobler or more timely gift. The Prince has need of such a man as you."

I bowed but did not answer.

"You are a stranger here, you say. May I ask your purpose in coming?"

"I am in search of a career."

"I can promise you that," she cried swiftly, with manifest pleasure. "I can promise you that certainly, if you will serve his Highness as bravely as you have served me to-night. You must not think, because you see me here, seemingly alone and helpless, that I have lost my influence and power in the country. My enemies have done this—Russia through the vile agents she sends here to wound this distracted country to the death—suborning all that is honourable, debasing all that is pure, undermining all that is patriotic, lying,

slandering, scheming, wrecking, destroying, working all and any evil, bloodshed, and horror, to serve the one end ever in their eyes—the subjugation of this wretched people. My God ! that such injustice should be wrought !”

The fire and passion flamed in her face as she spoke with rapid vehemence.

“ But it is by such men as you that this can best be thwarted—can only be thwarted. I tell you, Count, the Prince has need of such men as you. Pledge me now that you will join him and—and me. You have seen here to-night the lengths to which these villains would go. Because of my influence with the Prince, and in opposition to Russia, I have been lured here by a lying message ; lured to be murdered in cold blood, as you saw. You saved my life ; I have put my honour in your hands ; you have offered to serve me. You are a brave, true, honourable man. You must be with us !” she cried vehemently. “ Give me your word—nay, you have given it, and I can claim it. You will not desert me. Make the cause of truth and honour yours, and tell me that my Prince and I may rely on you.”

She set me on fire with her words and glances of appeal, and at the close she laid her hands on mine, until I was thrilled by the infection of her enthusiasm, while her eyes sought mine, and she seemed to hunger for the words of consent for which she waited.

CHAPTER II

"NOW YOU WILL HAVE TO JOIN US"

TEMPTING as the offer was which my strange companion made me, I could not bring myself to accept it without time for consideration, and my hesitation in replying irritated and seemed to anger her.

She thrust my hands away from her with petulant quickness.

"You are a man of strangely deliberate discretion, Count," she said as she turned away to the end of the room and threw herself into her chair again, from which she regarded me with a glance half scornful, half entreating.

"If I do not accept at once, believe me it is from no lack of appreciation of the honour you offer me or the charm with which it is offered, but circumstances compel me to be deliberate."

"Circumstances?" she cried, with a shrug of disdain and disappointment.

"I regret that I cannot explain them."

I could not, without telling her the whole reason of my presence in Sofia; and that was of course impossible. My secret commission was from the British Government, and the intrigue which I had to try and defeat was designed to depose her Prince, and set on the throne in his place a woman who would be a mere tool in the hands of Russia.

I am half a Roumanian by birth, my father having

married the Countess of Radova, and my childhood had been spent in the Balkan peninsula. It was on one of my visits to the estates in Radova that I had come across the scent of this newest Russian intrigue, and as I had already had close communications with the British Foreign Office and accepted one or two missions of a secret character, I had volunteered for this, believing that single-handed I could effect secretly much more than could be done by the ordinary machinery of diplomacy. The Balkan States were in a condition of ferment and unrest; the war between Bulgaria and Servia had ended not long previously; Russia was keenly bent upon rendering her influence impregnable; and as no other European Government would interfere, our Foreign Office was loath to take open measures.

At such a juncture my services were readily accepted, and I had arrived in Sofia a couple of weeks before, and was just forming my plans, when this startling incident had occurred.

I had stipulated for a perfectly free hand as to the course I should pursue, and the means I should adopt to secure my end—a concession that had been granted me with the one stipulation that if I failed or if trouble arose through my agency our Foreign Office would be at liberty to disown me.

It will thus be seen how strongly I was tempted to accept the offer which the Countess Bokara made me, and which I knew she was in a position to carry out. But still I hesitated, unwilling to commit myself definitely to either side prematurely, lest such open alliance with the one side should make me a mark for the hostility of the other.

My instincts, sympathies, English associations and

wishes all prompted me to accept the offer and throw myself heart and soul into the cause of the Prince; but I had to walk by the cooler guidance of judgment, and it had before been in my thoughts rather to seek an alliance with the Russian party and find among their ranks the men and means for a counter intrigue to thwart theirs.

I resolved, therefore, not to pledge myself to this witching woman, whose strange personality wielded such fascinating influence.

Few as were the moments that sufficed for these reflections, they were too many for my companion's patience.

"How came you here to-night so opportunely?" she asked, breaking the silence suddenly.

"You passed me on the other side of the Cathedral Square, and I then observed you were being followed. I followed in my turn, lest you should be in need of assistance."

"There are not many men in Sofia who would have dared to interfere in such a cause. But for you I should be dead now," she shuddered, "and the Prince would have had one friend the less—or may I not say, two friends?"

"The Prince will always have a friend in me," I returned guardedly.

She made a movement of impatience.

"I want no general phrases." Then after a pause and in a different tone, she added: "Tell me, what arguments are the strongest that I can use with you, my friend? You said just now you were seeking a career. Have you ambitions? If so, I can promise you a splendid fulfilment of them. Do you wish riches? They shall be yours! Have you a heart? I

will find you as fair a bride as man's eyes can rest upon. Have you judgment? Aye, have you anything—except a commitment to the other side—and I can prevail with you. Join us, and before three months are over your head you shall be the Prince's right hand—and mine." The subtle witchery of her tone in the last two words was indescribable.

But I would not let her prevail, though her words and manner were well-nigh dazzling enough to carry me out of myself. The magnetism of her mere presence was overpowering.

"You are not fair to me, Countess. A man cannot reason coldly in the presence of such charms as you exert," I answered, stooping to flattery, though telling the truth.

She shook her head and tapped her foot on the ground.

"Say no, bluntly, if you will, but do not try to slip away with words of cheap and empty flattery. I am not appealing to you to join for my sake, gladly as I would welcome you, but for the sake of the Prince, for the cause of truth, for the honour and safety of Bulgaria. Stay——" as I was about to answer, "I have seen you act and I have read your character. I do not make mistakes. I know you are to be trusted. You have saved my life, at a greater risk than you may think, for you will be a marked man now; and I will do more than put my life in your hands—I will tell you everything. You will not reveal it—though, Heaven knows, betrayal is the religion of most men here," she exclaimed bitterly.

"I would rather you told me none of your secrets," I said, but she swept my protest aside with a wave of the hand.

"You wonder why you find me here in this house alone at night. You must wonder; I will tell you. It is my mother's house—my own is across the city near the Palace—and to-night her own maid came to me with an urgent message that my mother had been stricken down suddenly and was dying, and that I must come at once. It was a lie, of course, though for the moment it blinded me. I hurried here on foot, too anxious even to wait for a carriage to be got ready, and when I arrived the place was empty. While I was wondering whether I had been betrayed, the men you saw—to whom keys of the place had been given—entered, and would assuredly have murdered me but for your arrival. That is how Russia plays her cards in Bulgaria."

"How do you know they were Russian agents?"

"How do I know that when I am hungry I want to eat? Wearied, I need sleep? Bah! do you think I have no instincts, and do not know my enemies? How do I know their plans and plots?" She fired the questions at me with vindictive indignation and a smile of surprise that I should even ask such a thing. Then her expression changed to one of deep earnestness, her tone hard and bitter.

"I will tell you how you shall know it, too. They have tried every other means but this to separate me from my Prince. Threats at which I laughed; bribes to be anything I pleased, which I scorned; hints of his assassination, which I carried to him; everything—till only this was left; and now this," and she touched her wound lightly. "And even this, thanks to your valour, Count, has now failed. And their object, you will ask? They have a plot to drive my Prince from Bulgaria, because he will not be their

tool. You know he will not ; all Europe knows it, and knows too that the only chance for Bulgaria's real independence is that he shall remain on the throne here. And remain he shall, I swear, by the great God they all profess to worship, in spite of all their crafty intrigue and bloodthirsty plotting. And yet, mark you, the worst danger lies not with them, but with the fools and traitors in Bulgaria itself whom they delude or suborn. There is not a self-interest to which they do not appeal, from the ambition of the fool to the corruptness of the knave. And God knows, both knaves and fools are plentiful enough here."

"And their scheme?" I asked, moved by her intense earnestness.

She looked at me sharply.

"Then you do wish to hear it?" she asked, referring to my former protest. "You shall. There is a woman—a seemingly innocent, soft-natured thing, all sweetness and grace, but a devil; with the beauty of an angel and the heart of a vampire—a devil."

Her fury was instant, overwhelming, absorbing.

"Did they propose marrying her to your Prince?" I asked, making a shot.

She darted at me a swift glance that might have been winged with hate at the mere suggestion. Then her eyes changed, and she laughed and said softly:

"You are the man for us. Calm as a sword and as sharp as the point. Yes, they dared even that—but I was in the way. In another woman's hands they thought he might have been won round. But rather than see him the husband of that fiend, Christina, I myself would have plunged a dagger into his heart—and they guessed this, I suppose, and changed the plan. She is the Princess of Orli, as probably you

know—for I don't suppose you are quite as unknowing as you seem—and apparently is all for Bulgaria and the Bulgarians. Like you, she is a Roumanian, and like you, if I read you right, she is driven from her country by the all-powerful Russian predominance—at least, that's what she says. Isn't that why you left?" she asked, with quick shrewdness.

"The Russian predominance there is undoubted," I answered.

She liked the answer and laughed.

"Good! you are cautious, and I don't blame you. For the lips that breathe out rashness breathe in danger, my friend. But now, will you join us? You can see the career that awaits such a man as yourself here—at the right hand of the Prince."

"But if the Princess Christina is opposed to Russia, how does she threaten Bulgaria?"

"Aye, if?" and she laughed scornfully. "There is another complication. The woman has sold herself to the Russians. She is betrothed secretly to one of the worst of them all, a man of infinite vileness and treachery—the Duke Sergius. And the plot is that as soon as this Christina is on the throne, the precious pair are to be married, and Russia triumphs in despite of anything Europe may say to the contrary."

"I see," and so in truth I did; for in a moment the kernel of the whole movement was laid bare to me, as well as the objective of all my work in Bulgaria. I remained some moments buried in thought, and all the time my companion's eyes were searching my face for a clue to my thoughts. "It is very Russian," I said at length, equivocally; and at the words she made a quick gesture of impatience.

"You will not give me a sign," she cried, and jumped

to her feet impulsively. "But you will join us?" she asked. She came close to me as she waited for the answer, and when I did not answer, she added quickly, "Why do you hesitate?"

Before I could reply, we both heard a noise somewhere in the house.

"What can that be?" I asked. "You said there was no one in the house."

"None, that I know;" and we both stood listening intently. "Those rascals may have left the place open and let in some of the thieves that infest the streets."

"Those are no thieves' footsteps," I answered, as quick steps were heard approaching the room.

"It may be another attempt on me—but I have a brave defender now," she said, under her breath.

I had a revolver with me and took it out of my pocket, glancing to see that the chambers were all loaded.

"You had better stand back at the end of the room there," and I went towards the door.

At that moment it was opened quickly, and three men in uniform entered.

"Stand!" I called. "What do you want here?"

"I am an agent of the Government and hold an order for the arrest of the Countess Bokara," answered the leader, coming to a sudden halt when he saw me in the way armed.

"Well, you cannot execute it now."

"My orders are imperative, sir, and you will resist me at your peril."

"I shall resist," said I shortly. "Where's your order?"

"I have it, that is enough," he replied with equal curtness.

"Produce it!"

"That is not in my instructions."

"Then I don't believe you have it. Leave the house before there is any further trouble."

"I must do my duty. Georgiew," he called to one of the two men, who had kept close to the door in fear, but now stepped up to his leader's side.

"Who has signed your order?" asked the Countess, interposing.

"One whose authority is sufficient for me."

"But not for me," she cried. I turned, and found to my surprise that she had come to my side, and was staring with fixed intensity into the man's face. "Not for me," she repeated.

"You must be prepared to accompany me, madame, nevertheless, and I trust you will come at once, and without causing trouble. We are three to one, sir, and fully armed; resistance will be useless," he added to me.

"If you were thirty to one I would not give way unless you produced your authority," I answered, my blood beginning to heat under his manner and tone.

"I ask you for the last time, madame, to come with me," and, with a sign to the others, he made ready to attack me.

"Aye, for the last time," said my companion, between her teeth, and before I could guess her intention, she gave a startling proof of her desperate resource and deadly recklessness.

With a suddenness that took me entirely by surprise, she snatched the revolver from me, and levelling it with quick aim, she fired two shots in rapid succession with deadly effect, for the two men standing near us fell dead at our feet, shot through the head. The third, who had kept near the door, with a coward's prudence,

took to his heels incontinently, and left us alone with the dead.

"Good God! what have you done?" I cried, aghast at her deed. "These men were soldiers."

She laughed into my scared face.

"You don't suppose death counts for much in this country. This is only spy carrion," and with the utmost *sang-froid* she stooped and rifled the pockets of the dead leader, turning the body over for the purpose, and took from his pocket a paper which she held up for me to read. "I was sure of it."

"What the bearer does is by my order and authority.

(Signed), M. KOLFORT, *General*."

"General Kolfort is the implacable leader of the Russian party, and that document was my death warrant," she said.

In a moment I saw my danger, and she read my thought instantly.

"Yes, you are committed, my friend; now you will have to join us," and she smiled triumphantly in my face. "I am glad."

CHAPTER III

THE PRINCESS CHRISTINA

THE amazing turn which events had taken through the terrible act of my companion filled me with consternation at the possible effects to us both ; and after I had satisfied myself that the two men were dead and so beyond help, I paced the room in anxious, perturbed thought.

She was not in the least perturbed, and filled the minutes by going carefully through the leader's papers in search of anything that would tend to the confusion of her enemies. A low exclamation of pleasure told me that, when she found what she sought.

She showed no jot or tittle of remorse at this shedding of blood. To her the two men were no more than a couple of wild beasts who had attacked her, and had been killed in her self-defence. She was as hard and callous as any public executioner could have been.

" See here ! " she cried at length. " Here are proofs enough of the villany," and she put papers into my hand which showed plainly enough that the whole matter had been planned by those high in the Russian party. One was no less than a clear but brief statement of instructions. If the first attempt at secret assassination failed, this endeavour by means of a pretended arrest by men in uniform dressed to look like officers was to be made, and the Countess was to be

hurried to Tirnova to be dealt with there, should she reach the fortress alive.

"You will need these when the attempt is made to implicate you. Yours is a deadly sin—to have come between Kolfort and his vengeance—and you will need all your wits to get out of it with your life, even with these papers, unless you throw yourself under the protection of the Prince and his party. As I said, you will have to join us now, Count."

"I shall still take time to consider," I answered rather shortly. "You have given me plenty of food for thought. But now, what of your immediate safety? You cannot stay here."

"Nor you, either. You let the third man escape, and by this time he is carrying his news of failure with feet winged with fear. I have done with this carrion," and she cast a look of repugnance at the dead men, and turning away, resumed her cloak with great haste. "You will not decide now?" she asked, as she was ready to go.

"No, I must have time. But where will you go now?"

"I shall communicate with you. You will be a marked man from this hour, and easy to find," she said significantly; "and if you are in danger sooner than you expect, do not hesitate to let me know. Our next meeting will be in the Prince's palace, and the sooner the better."

"Where will you go now?" I repeated.

"Do not fear for me. You will need all your efforts to save your own skin. Come!" She left the light burning, and led the way out of the house by a back entrance that opened on to a narrow alley, along which we hurried.

"I will see you safe to your home," I said, when she stopped at the mouth of it and held out her hand. She smiled.

"No, no, I am in no danger; but for you, take this path as far as it goes, turn sharp to the right until you come to an avenue of trees, and at the bottom of that you will know where you are. Good-night, Count! and once more I thank you with all my heart for your service. But we shall both live to see my thanks in an alliance that will do great things for the Prince and for Bulgaria."

She gave me her hand, and though I pressed her to let me see her safely across the city, she would not, but put me on my honour not to follow her, and turning, sped away, keeping in the shadow, and going at such a speed that she was soon out of my sight.

Then I followed the way she had told me, and found myself close to the street in which my hotel was situated. I walked slowly from that point, my brain in a whirl of excitement at all that had happened in the crowded hours of that night.

When I reached my hotel it was only to pace my room in restless, anxious, brain-racking thought of the net of complications in which I found myself involved, and the hundred dangers which appeared to have sprung up suddenly to menace me. It was in vain that I threw myself on my bed. I could not sleep. If I dozed, it was only to start up at the bidding of some dream danger, threatening me with I know not what consequences. It was long past the dawn before I slept, and when the servant called me, I sprang up, thinking it was my instant arrest that was intended.

But my wits were cooler and more collected for the rest, and when hour after hour of the anxious day

passed and nothing happened, I began to think I had exaggerated the risks of my position.

In the cool of the evening I rode out, and on my return ventured to find out and pass through the street of the previous night's adventure. Nothing unusual was astir. No one paid the least heed to me. I might have been an ordinary tourist without the least interest in anything but the scenery. So it was at my hotel. Nothing happened that evening nor on any of the three remaining days of the week, and I occupied myself with the business of preparing the large house which I had taken for my residence.

Yet, even the lack of any consequences to me had a grim significance. It seemed a fearsome thing, indeed, that murder could be attempted openly, and two of the would-be assassins shot dead in the effort, and yet the life of the city flow on without the least interruption, and, as it appeared, with never a person to ask a question about them or show the faintest interest in the event. Truly, as my strange companion in the adventure had said, death counted for little in the grim game of intrigue that was being played in the country.

I had provided myself with a few letters of introduction, and, knowing the average poverty of the people and the high esteem set on riches, I had dropped a number of judicious hints that I was a man of considerable wealth. I had taken the largest house I could find in the city, and by these means had opened a way into a certain section of society. It had been my original intention to use such opportunities as would thus be afforded to carry out my original intention. But the adventure with the Countess Bokara would render this less necessary should I resolve to accept the offer of close service with the Prince which she had

made me ; and the few guarded inquiries I was able to make as to her influence confirmed completely my previous belief in her power to fulfil all she had promised.

Several days passed, and I was in this condition of comparative uncertainty when, toward the close of the week following my adventure, an incident occurred which gave me startling proof that, for all the apparent quietude, I myself was, as she had declared, a marked man.

I was sitting alone in a *café* one evening, my friends having left me, when my attention was attracted to the movements of three men, two being in uniform, at a table in a far corner of the place. They were busily occupied over some papers, and a constant succession of men kept coming to them, as it seemed to me, for some kind of instructions. As business was constantly transacted in this way at the *cafés*, I had at first no more than a feeling of idle curiosity ; but when the thing had continued for an hour or more, my interest deepened, and I watched them closely, although, as I thought, unobserved by them.

At length a message was given them which appeared to cause great surprise, and they paid their score and hurried out of the place.

I followed them, still impelled mainly by curiosity ; and as they were engrossed in conversation, talking and gesticulating, I had no difficulty in keeping them in sight as they passed through several streets, and at length entered a large house which filled one side of a small quadrangle, close on the street.

I stood awhile at the corner, scanning the house curiously, and made a mental note to ascertain to whom it belonged, and was in the act of turning away

to retrace my steps to my hotel, when a man came out of the house, glanced about him as though in some doubt, and then looked closely at me. He walked to the corner of the street opposite, still looking at me, and after a minute of doubt, crossed to me.

"I am to give you this, sir," he said, speaking with the manner of a confidential servant.

"To me? I think not. What name?" I asked.

"I had no name given to me, but I was to say it was 'In the Name of a Woman!'"

"'In the Name of a Woman?'" I repeated. It could not be for me. I knew no such pass-word, and I connected it instantly with what I had seen at the *café*. I was about to send the man away, when it occurred to me that it might be a message from the Countess Bokara, and that, from a love of mystery, she had chosen this exceedingly ambiguous method of communication. I took the letter which the man held out, therefore, and read a message written in a woman's handwriting:—

"Follow the Bearer,
In the Name of a Woman."

I was disposed to smile, but checked myself on seeing the servant's eyes fixed upon me.

"I am to follow you," I said gravely.

Without a word he led the way back to the house, through the deep gloomy archway, in which I noticed a number of servants and others lounging and waiting, and up three or four steps into the house. Turning to make sure that I was behind him, the man crossed a hall, in which were more men, some in uniform, through a curtained archway at the end, and up a broad stair.

way on to a wide landing-place until he paused before a large dark oak door. He opened this quietly and stood aside for me to enter.

As I did so, some words came to my ears that were certainly not intended for a stranger to hear.

“Curse the business. I am sick of the place. The sooner this thing’s over and Christina is on the throne and married to Sergius, the sooner we shall be back in Moscow and out of this beastly hole.”

The voice was loud and strident, and the language Russian; and the speaker, a young red-haired man, in an officer’s uniform, laughed noisily. I was in the room before the sentence ended, but I came to an abrupt halt in my surprise, and perceiving at once the mistake that had been made, I half turned to leave the room again. But the man who had brought me had already closed the door.

My surprise was not one whit greater than that of the three men in the room, however, who were standing together by a table with their backs to the door, and not having heard it open, did not know I was there till the officer who had spoken turned round.

“Hullo! who the devil’s this?” he exclaimed. “What do you want, sir?” and I saw his hand go to his sword hilt.

His companions turned quickly on hearing him, and stared at me with evident amazement.

“Be quiet, Marx,” said one of them in Russian, a much older man, and apparently in command. Then in Bulgarian to me, “May I ask your business, sir?”

“On my word, I know no more than yourself,” I answered, keeping my eye on the red-haired man whose threatening looks I did not at all like. “I am here ‘In the Name of a Woman,’ I presume. A mes-

senger accosted me a few minutes since in the street close by and gave me a written message to follow him. He brought me here—and that's all I know."

"A cool devil, on my word," exclaimed the red-headed man, and whispered something to the third which I could not catch.

"There has seemingly been some mistake," said the elder man suavely. "You have not been long in the room, sir?"

"Certainly not, the door has but barely closed."

"You are too much of a gentleman, of course, to intrude yourself upon us unannounced and listen to our private conversation." There was an ominous suggestion of threat in the words, and behind them I could detect not a little anxiety and embarrassment.

One of the other officers gave a little sneering laugh.

"You wish to know whether I have overheard anything? I speak Russian, and as I entered I could not help hearing what was being said."

A look of concern showed on all three faces as I spoke.

"You will have the goodness to repeat what you overheard," said the elder man, his voice hardening and deepening.

I repeated in Russian almost word for word what had been said, and the man whose unguarded words I had overheard turned very white.

An embarrassing silence followed.

"And what meaning do you attach to the words, sir?"

"I do not see that they concern me, or that I am called upon to give any explanation," I answered coolly.

"By God! you shall answer," broke in impetuously and passionately the red-haired man, as he made a couple of strides toward me.

His superior frowned upon him and muttered a word of caution.

I began to feel glad that I had brought my sword-stick with me.

"One moment; excuse me," said the elder man, whose great uneasiness was now very manifest, and the three held a hurried consultation, in which I could see the red-haired man urging some plan from which the elder strongly dissented. Then the latter turned again to me.

"I must press you to answer my question, sir," he said.

"The words could have only one possible meaning," I replied, seeing no use in equivocation. "The hope was expressed that Christina, presumably the Princess of Orli, would soon be on the throne and married to the Duke Sergius, in order that the speaker might be free to return to Moscow." I spoke very deliberately.

"I told you so. The fellow may be a spy and can't go free after that," exclaimed the fiery officer. "Have up the men at once and let him be secured until we find out all about him," and he went to the bell-pull to summon the servants or more probably soldiers.

My next act surprised him and stayed his hand, however. I had observed a couple of heavy bolts on the door, and thinking that I had better have three men to deal with than thirty, I shot them into their sockets, and setting my back to the door, said shortly:

"There should be nothing in this which we cannot settle amongst ourselves, gentlemen, and with your

permission I prefer to have no one else here until it is settled."

This was too much for the two younger men. They drew their swords at once and came toward me.

"You will stand aside from that door at once, or take the consequences," said the red-haired man.

My answer was to whip my sword from the stick and put myself on the defensive. The door stood in an angle of the room, excellently placed for my purpose, as my two opponents would be much hampered in attacking me together, and I was not afraid of what either could do single-handed.

Their anger at my resistance made them deaf to the protests and expostulations of their superior. The red man was the first to cross swords, and he was so indifferent a swordsman that I could have disabled him had not the second perceived his inferiority and made at me in his turn.

A very pretty fight followed, but infinitely perilous to me. Even if I were successful I could not see how possibly to escape from the house, which as I knew was swarming with men. But I went to work with a will, and soon had cause to thank the advantage I gained owing to the position of the door.

The object of the less furious of the two was rather to disarm than to wound, and I noticed that he neglected more than one opportunity of wounding me. The other was a hot-headed fool, however, and was obviously dead bent on killing me ; but a couple of minutes later I had an excellent chance of settling matters with him. He was fighting in a furious, haphazard, reckless fashion, when the second man stumbled from some cause and was out of the fray for several passes. I made the most of the respite, and pressing the fight to the

utmost, I ran my assailant through the sword arm, inflicting a wound which caused him to drop his sword. I kicked it behind me, and was thus free to devote my whole attention to my other assailant.

I was cleverer with the weapon than he, as I perceived to my intense satisfaction, and was considering where I would wound him and end the fight, when my luck turned. I trod by mischance on the hilt of the sword at my feet, stumbled, and, unable to save myself, fell staggering at full length on the floor.

It was all over, and I gave myself up for lost, when a most unexpected and infinitely welcome interruption came.

A door at the other end of the room, which was hidden by the curtains and tapestries that covered the walls, opened, and I heard a woman's soft clear voice, in which vibrated a note of indignation and anger, exclaim :

"Gentlemen, what is this brawling?"

The others turned at the sound of the voice, and I scrambled to my feet in an instant, gripped my weapon again, and was once more ready against attack ; though I stared with all my eyes at the lovely face of the queenly woman who had entered.

"Put up your swords, gentlemen, instantly!" she said; and in obedience the man who still had his weapon sheathed it and fell back abashed behind his superior officer.

Intuitively I recognised the Princess Christina.

CHAPTER IV

"THE WEB IS WIDE, THE MESHES HARD TO BREAK"

"As beautiful as an angel, and with the heart of a vampire."

This bitter description rushed to my thoughts as I gazed at the Princess Christina. Surely never had treachery, cruelty, and ambition a fairer guise than hers, if treacherous and cruel she could be.

But the thought started another suspicion. Had this scene all been planned by her to catch me in the toils? It was a dramatic enough entrance for me into her circle, and certainly clever. It had been made to appear as if I had forced my way into the house, had overheard a compromising secret, had had my very life placed in danger, and then at the critical moment it was to her coming I owed my safety. If this were so, I could understand why the less hot-headed of my two assailants had first rushed to the assistance of his comrade, but had then refrained from pressing the advantage of the odds against me in the fight, and had not attempted even to wound me.

Could that lovely, ingenuous-looking woman have laid such a scheme, and then have carried it out with such shrewd stage-management, putting that little ring of anger into her voice at all the clatter of the fight?

If so the danger that had seemed to threaten me had never existed, and I might as well do as she bade, and put up the sword which had never been needed in

earnest. With a smile at the notion I sheathed it, and waited for the next development of the comedy.

Yet the anger in her eyes seemed sincere enough, and if she was only acting she understood her business well; for the indignation on her face and the liquid notes of her perfect voice moved me to regret even my share in the fracas, though it had been none of my seeking.

"Major Zankoff, have you such poor command of your subordinates that they must seek to shed blood almost in my very presence?" At the rebuke the eldest of the three men winced and bit his lip, but made no reply except a bow. "You know my will, sir!" she continued, with the mien of an empress; "and any repetition of this forgetfulness will find me deeply angered even against you."

"Madame, I am already punished," replied the major, with the bow of a courtier and the shrewdness of a diplomat.

"As for you, gentlemen," she said, turning to the other two, "I shall use my influence to see that you are relieved from duties which you must surely find irksome, since you seek relaxation in this cut and thrust work. Be good enough to leave me."

This was a somewhat embarrassing request, for I was by the door, and still held my foot on the fallen sword. I was not disposed to have the door open lest others should be brought in, and they were not willing that I should have a chance of escape, carrying their secret with me. The three exchanged looks, and then the major came to the rescue.

"There is a matter that needs explanation to you, madame——" he began, when she cut him short.

"I will hear nothing, Major Zankoff, until these gentlemen have left me."

Another embarrassing pause followed, in which she let her eyes glance toward me and rest a moment on my face, with an effect I cannot describe. In an instant it seemed as if all my doubts of her sincerity dropped from me like a cloak. I felt absolutely assured, not only of her purity and truth, but of my own complete safety in trusting her, and with an impulse that was as irresistible as it was instantaneous, I cut the knot of the difficulty.

I picked up the fallen sword, left my place by the door, and handed it back to the owner.

He flashed a curse at me out of his eyes that I should have been the cause and witness of his humiliation, and muttered in a tone too low to reach other ears than mine, as he bent his head in sheathing the weapon :

“I will find you out, sir.”

“Count Benderoff, Hôtel de l’Europe,” I whispered, meeting his look with one as stern as his own, and then stood aside for him and his companion to pass out of the room.

The Princess waited in silence until the door had closed behind them, and then addressed me :

“Why have you come to bring your quarrels here, sir?”

“I think I can best explain——” began Major Zankoff.

“I have asked this gentleman for his explanation, Major,” she broke in, and I liked her calm assertion of authority.

“I have brought no quarrel here, Madame,” and I explained very briefly the facts up to the moment of her entrance.

She bent her dark eyes on me during the recital, and

gradually the colour of her cheeks deepened, until at the close, with a flush of indignation and anger, she cried :

"You have been shamefully treated, sir—shamefully and outrageously. Because by chance some hot-headed idler cannot keep his tongue still, but must blab of matters he does not understand, shall murder be attempted? Major Zankoff, what had this gentleman done that you should sanction this atrocious act? We owe you an ample apology, sir; and I, the Princess Christina of Orli"—drawing herself to her full height—"tender it to you. I do not ask your name. I ask nothing, but only tell you I am profoundly sorry and deeply grieved that this should have occurred. Major Zankoff, it is my express wish that you will see this gentleman safely out of the house, and conduct him to any part of the city he desires. His safety will be your personal charge."

And with this she swept across the room and herself held open the door for me to leave.

Her beauty and grace, and, much more, the instinctive justice of her act and implied trust in my honour, conquered me. I did not wish to leave her, and lingered gazing at her in admiration. This was the Countess Bokara's vampire. If this was how she gained her victims, I, at any rate, was ready to be one of them. As we stood thus, she holding the door and I unwilling to go, our eyes met, and I was filled with one consuming, burning impulse to serve her.

Then came an interruption, which I for one welcomed profoundly.

An old man, in the uniform of a high Russian officer, entered through the door which she had used, and in a high-pitched voice said sharply :

"This is a somewhat unusual scene. What does it mean?"

I was watching the Princess closely, and saw an expression of some disconcertment and alarm rush into her eyes, to be as quickly forced down and followed by what I half dared to hope was a look of solicitude on my account. The eyes seemed to beg me to leave while the way was still open.

But I would not have gone for a fortune. I was ten thousand times more eager to stay.

Major Zankoff gave an expressive shrug of the shoulders as he said in reply to the question: "There has been a little misunderstanding, General."

The small, alert, piercing eyes seemed to take in the situation at one sweeping glance that dwelt lastly on my face.

"Princess, can I have a word with you? Major Zankoff, close the door and guard it. We want no one in—or out," he let the last two words drop from his lips as though they were an after-thought and not intended to be spoken aloud.

"I am telling this gentleman that he is at liberty to leave here, General," she answered, lifting her head with what I read as an intentional assertion of authority, not made, however, without an effort.

"Very good of you, very good indeed," he replied drily. "But as the gentleman does not seem disposed to go, suppose we close the door. There is a draught for one thing, and pretty situations should never be strained. Besides, I wish to have a word with him myself."

My wits had been somewhat mazed by the unexpected character of the meeting with the Princess and the whirl of strange and disturbing thoughts which she

had started, but these last words of the old soldier recalled me to myself quickly enough.

“With me?” I said in surprise.

“Certainly, with you,” he answered sharply.

The suggestion of solicitude for me still lingered on the Princess’s face as she left the door and went to the old man.

“I have passed my word for his safety, General,” and she looked meaningly at him.

“Do I look so fierce and terrible an object, madame, that the gentleman will be afraid to trust himself alone with me, think you?”

“I have passed my word for his safety,” she repeated, and turning to me, she added, “You may depend upon that, sir,” and as she left the room she gave me a look from her glorious eyes which seemed to say much more than even her words.

The old soldier smiled sardonically, and bowed low to her as she passed him.

“Umph! And now, sir, will you come with me; or are you, as madame was disposed to think, afraid to trust yourself with me? Zankoff, I do not wish to be disturbed,” he said abruptly to the Major.

He led me to a room beyond and motioned me to a chair, near the table at which he seated himself.

“You know, I presume, where you are, who I am, and who that is we have just left!” he began.

“I do not know all, but I can make a shrewd guess. She is the Princess Christina; you, I presume, General Kolfort, and this house, either yours or hers.”

“As you say, a very shrewd guess—even for one known to have such quick wits as the Count Benderoff, of Radova.” He intended to surprise me, as indeed

he did, by the mention of my name ; but I showed no sign of this, although he looked for it.

"Why did you force your way in here—unless, indeed, you had an object which I shall only be too glad to welcome?"

"I will make another guess," I answered. "I came through your own contriving, General ;" and this time it was he, not I, who had to conceal surprise—for my guess was right.

He looked at me and nodded his head.

"It is my business to know all newcomers to Sofia," he said. "And you are too notable and have started too much comment for me not to know of you. My agents serve me well, and I thought it was full time for you to declare yourself. There are only two courses open to a man making a career in this country, as you have said you intend to do. Only two sides, one of which a man must take. You must be either for or against the interests of Russia—which is it to be?"

This was plain talking in all truth.

"I have been in the country too short a time to have weighed the considerations which must determine me."

"Good ; evasive but politic, though not, of course, convincing."

"Yet true," said I shortly.

"Very well. We'll take it at that ;" and he looked at me as if he were pondering carefully the arguments he should use to convince and win me. "Yet you've not been quite inactive, have you, although here so short a time?"

"You mean——?"

"What should I mean?" he asked, throwing up his

hands with an indifference that was belied by the sharp glint of his eyes.

Did he know of that night adventure, after all? If so, I had indeed walked into the spider's web.

"No, I have not been inactive, certainly not," I answered carelessly. "I have had to find a house suitable for my position and my means. I am a man of some wealth, and the work has taken time and care."

"No doubt. But I did not mean that kind of activity, Count. My sources of information are many—and secret. Few things are done in Sofia without my knowing them, as well as those who do them."

"Through your spies, you mean?"

He waved the term aside and passed over the question.

"We have had an accident lately, rather an awkward affair, which resulted in the death of a couple of our agents; but a third escaped and tells a strange story. Even your short acquaintance with Bulgarian affairs will tell you that the consequences may be serious for those concerned in their death."

"I can understand that. But with what object do you make me the recipient of such a confidence?" I asked coolly.

"You have made some shrewd guesses during our talk; I will leave you to make another in that matter. It may be only a parable; or, on the contrary, a matter of life or death for those concerned. In any case, the person concerned is known to me." The threat was conveyed with unmistakable significance. I understood him well enough, and he knew that I did; but I answered lightly:

"I don't see that this affects me."

"I hope with all my heart that it never will," he

said quickly, "for nothing would please me better than to have you enrolled on our side!"

He paused to let this, his first argument—an appeal to my fears—have due weight, and watched me keenly to note results. Apparently he was not too well satisfied with them.

"You have probably asked yourself why I am anxious, as I confess I am, that you should be with us, and yet if you reflect you will readily understand the reason. I have told you that there are but two courses open to a man who mixes in politics here. He must take a side. There is no possible alternative—no possible alternative. Well, I know much about you—more than you think, and I do not wish that a man who has shown such courage as you, on other occasions than to-day," he put in meaningly, "who has those parts of head and heart that carry a man far in troubled times like these; a man wealthy, daring, shrewd, honorable, ambitious, resourceful, and bound to wield influence, should enter the lists against me. Such a man must make a leader, and these Bulgars readily follow when the right man leads. It is all against our cause that such qualities should be devoted to the service of a craven Prince."

"You speak with great frankness."

He smiled and raised his eyebrows, giving a slight toss of the head.

"I can be frank with perfect safety. You are in my power, Count."

"I have the word of Princess Christina——"

"I do not mean in this house, I mean in this country," he interposed. "If you do not know the reach of my hands, it is time you learnt it. No man crosses this frontier without my knowledge, and no one re-

crosses it against my will. Do not mistake me ; I don't speak at random, nor am I uttering a mere empty boast. I am stating a plain fact. And the power which I wield you can share, if you will."

It was skilfully turned and cleverly put, and for the moment I was silent.

"The web is wide, the meshes hard to break, Count ; and I brought you here that you might see how wide and how hard. You were right just now in that shrewd guess of yours—I did bring you here. First, for that little dramatic test of your courage ; next, that you should see for yourself the glorious woman in whose cause we fight ; and lastly, that you should understand the obstacles that lie in the path of those who would oppose us. You say you seek a career. Well——" He paused here and looked most keenly at me as he added, "Englishmen have done the same before——"

I could not repress a start of surprise at the thrust, and he stopped to enjoy it.

"Yes, Englishmen—and Roumanians. But it is very rare for a Roumanian to combine the qualities which distinguish you, Count Benderoff. You perhaps know the English. If I mistake not, your father was an Englishman, and you may have met a certain Hon. Gerald Winthrop. I have such a man in my mind when I speak to you."

I sat gnawing my lip, my brows knitted in thought, and had no reply, while he looked at me with a smile at my evident consternation.

Then he gave a sudden and unexpected turn to the matter.

Pushing his chair back, he rose, and said in a frank and apparently friendly tone :

"I have taken you by surprise. Of course I know that, and do not wish to push the advantage unfairly. Don't decide now. I want your decision to be deliberate and the result of judgment, and not mere embarrassment. I will make you a fair offer. The frontier is free for you for three days—nay, for a week. Join us within that time, or let my agents report to me that you have crossed it. I want your services because I value them, but I do not intend my enemies to have them. If you really wish to make a career, I can help you as no one else can. I want no oaths; they don't bind me, and in this place bind no one beyond the limits of self-interest. If you join us, you would have to be faithful, or your life would be a mere candle-flame to be snuffed out at will. That is a better guarantee than any mere oaths. If you decide to throw in your lot with us, I shall be glad to see you at any time. If not, I hope we shall not meet again." And he held out his hand.

I took it, not over cordially, and left him, dismayed, perplexed and anxious, but with an appreciation of his power keen enough to have satisfied even him.

CHAPTER V

" SPERNOW "

A NIGHT'S reflection brought but slight relief to my anxiety and doubt. How that wily Russian general had succeeded so easily and promptly in discovering all about me, I was at a loss to guess ; nor was it of much profit to inquire. He had the facts, and the question was how he would use them ; and the first gleam of an answer came from a very small thing.

He had offered me first three days in which to leave the country, and then had extended the time to a week. Why ? I came to the conclusion at length that he had probably a double reason, for he was not the man to do anything without a clear reason. He was all against my joining the party of the Prince, and was probably resolved to go to extreme lengths to prevent me. But he knew also, though he had been crafty enough not to admit it openly, that I was an Englishman ; and that fact might well embarrass him in dealing with me.

Any ill-treatment of a British subject at such a juncture might bring about just such grave complications with our Foreign Office as might imperil the whole Russian under-current policy. That was, therefore, unquestionably one of my strong cards to play, and I resolved to use it promptly.

I judged that in all probability my correspondence would be tampered with, and would, if necessary, pass

under his own eyes ; so I wrote a letter to a friend in England, stating the fact plainly that I had had an interview with General Kolfort, the Russian leader, in which the fact that I was a British subject had been discussed between us, and added a few words of assumed annoyance that this should have happened, as it might interfere with my plans in making a career in Bulgaria. I put in some other general matter such as might be written in a friendly letter, and finished with a request that my correspondent would send me two or three articles I had left in his care. This was all fable, of course ; but I wrote it to make it more difficult for the General to suppress the letter. Then I added a postscript, with the usual sting in it.

“ If you get a chance, you might drop a side hint to Edwardes, of the Foreign Office, that I am here, and known to be English.”

I sealed the letter with careful clumsiness, so that the envelope could easily be opened without the seal being broken, marked it “ Urgent. Strictly private,” and then gave it to a waiter to post. If I was under the surveillance he had suggested, I felt convinced that nothing more was necessary to ensure its getting immediately into the General’s hands. It would at least give him food for thought.

Then as to his second object. Why had he given me any time at all? A Russian party, strong and unscrupulous enough to plan the assassination of the reigning Prince himself—as they had done—would have thought nothing of keeping me, a mere Roumanian Count (as I told them I was when they had me on the previous evening), rushing me off incontinently to the frontier, and bidding me be off about my business under fear of a stray bullet should I attempt to

return. But he had given me a week to deliberate, and I drew the inference that he was really anxious to have an Englishman on his side, and that he meant to use the week to bring strong inducements to bear upon me.

And through all these reflections one dazzling remembrance flashed, as the sun will flash through thin foliage after a summer shower—the great steady glare caught and reflected from a myriad drops on the wet, dancing leaves. It was the memory of the glorious beauty of the Princess, with that look of solicitude for me and of fear of the General which I had seemed to catch.

I had no more desire to fly the country than I had had to leave her witching presence, and a thousand thoughts rushed through my mind, bewildering, stirring, fascinating me, and all urging me to stay until I had at least probed the meaning of her look, and determined whether I could in any way serve her. If she really stood in need of a friend, how gladly—— And at that point I broke the thought with a laugh at my own silly conceit. She had a hundred, aye, a thousand men at her command. And I was a fool.

But I would not leave the country if I could help it, and I ordered a horse and rode out, first to see how nearly my house was ready, and then away for a gallop in the country.

On my return I learned that two officers had called and asked for me; had left word that, as their business was urgent, they would return early in the afternoon. I did not know the names—Captain Dimitrieff and Lieutenant Grassaw—and I could not think what they wanted with me, but I resolved to wait in for them; and while I was waiting, a servant brought

me a card from another stranger—Lieutenant Spennow.

The moment he entered I liked his pleasant, cheery looks, and his frank, unrestrained, self-possessed manner impressed me most favourably. With a smile he offered me his hand, and said:

"I have come in a quite unusual way, Count Benderoff. I am sent, in fact, to make your acquaintance. I am assured we shall speedily be friends."

"I am certainly at your service," I answered, unable to resist a smile at his singular introduction.

"It has an odd sound after all, hasn't it; and yet, do you know, I've been thinking how I should put it and rehearsing, all the way. It does sound devilish odd from a stranger, but I do hope—for reasons that weigh infinitely with me, I can assure you—that so odd an introduction will really lead to friendship."

"You say you were sent to me?" I asked, cautiously.

"Yes; I assure you I am frankness itself. They never trust me with important secrets; I blurt them out;" and he laughed, as though that were rather a good trait. "Old Kolfort sent me—Old Kolfort for one."

"I saw General Kolfort last evening," I replied, drily. "But sit down and have a cigar, and then tell me why he is so interested in providing me with friends."

"That's a good straight question, but I'll be hanged if I can answer it. He's such a sly old fox, with fifty secret reasons for every plain one. Thanks, I'll have a cigar. Well, he sent for me this morning—you know, I am on the Russian tack in all this business, and that for a reason which I'm pretty sure to let out

before I've been many minutes with you; in fact, bound to, come to think of it—and—let's see, where was I? Oh, yes; he sent for me, and said, 'Lieutenant, I have a pleasant duty for you—and an important one. I wish you to go to Count Benderoff and make a friend of him—he told me your hotel—and do what you can to make his stay in Sofia pleasant, as it may be only a very short one. You're the best man I know to let him see what's worth seeing in the city, and to let him know what's worth knowing.'

"It promises to be a very kind act on his part." I spoke sincerely, and my visitor smiled at the words.

"It shall be, if you'll let me, Count, I assure you. But that old fox always has a bitter wrapped up somewhere in the sweet; and as I was leaving, after having talked you over, of course, he pretended to remember something, and said, 'Oh, by the way, take this letter to the Count with an apology from me. By an unfortunate mistake it has got opened by some clumsy idiot, and was brought to me to know what should be done. Tell the Count I'm very sorry, but perhaps he may not care to send it for a week or so, after all.' 'What is it?' said I. 'Of no consequence; but the little act will be an introduction for you.' Then I saw it was one of those infernal things that are always being done in this country—an intercepted letter, and I felt inclined to fling it in his face, only I daren't. I let him have a word or two about choosing me for such work, but I brought it, and I'm afraid you'll think I'm a regular cad to lend myself to such a thing. But I'll tell you why I decided to bring it in a minute; and I hope I needn't assure you I don't know a word of what's inside."

I accepted his word without hesitation, and be-

lieved in his expressions of disgust at the mission. I took the letter readily enough, and was indeed glad that my little ruse had succeeded so completely. Then I gave it a finishing touch.

"I suppose he'll expect you to report what I said. Well, here's the answer." I struck a match and set fire to the letter, holding it until it was consumed. "It's not of the least consequence, I assure you, for I took the precaution to send off a duplicate in proper disguise."

"The devil you did. I'm infernally glad to hear it. I love to hear of old Crafty being licked at his own game." Then he started and rapped the table as he laughed and asked: "Was that a decoy? Oh, that's lovely. I won't tell him. I hate the old tyrant, and he knows it; but he knows, too, that I'm horribly afraid of him. And that's what he likes. Gad, that's good!" and he lay back in his chair and laughed aloud at the thought of the General being outwitted. "And he was so damned serious, too, that I know he thought he'd done a mighty smart thing."

He was obviously sincere, and it was impossible not to see that he thoroughly enjoyed what he deemed a good joke. When he had had his laugh out, he gave a little sigh of relief as he said:

"Well, that's over, and I hope you'll acquit me of any personal part in the matter or humbug."

"My dear sir, I acquit you of everything except of having done an unpleasant thing pleasantly," I answered, cordially.

"Thanks. And now, is your stay going to be very short in Sofia? I must tell you before you answer that that's a thing old Crafty told me to find out. I suppose he has some underground reason or other? He's a beggar for that."

"Frankly, I don't know. I hope not, but I don't yet know."

"Well, I was surprised when he mentioned it, because we'd heard that you'd taken a big house, and were going to make a bit of a splash, you know. And, by Jove, it would be a blessing, for most of the houses here are just deadly dull."

" '*We* heard,' you say? "

"How quick you are!" he answered with a smile, and he had a slightly heightened colour as he went on. "Yes, we—we two; not old Kolfort, you know. But—well, we've had a chat about you more than once; and last night, after you'd been at the General's house, we had a regular consultation about you—and, to tell you the truth, that's another reason why I've come."

"I don't think I understand."

"No, of course you don't. I don't altogether. I think; but——" He hesitated, and pulled at his cigar for some moments in a little embarrassment. "You see, it's a bit difficult to make you understand without telling what a man doesn't care to talk about. I suppose something happened at the General's that affected you closely, and made you—hang it all! Wait a minute, and let me try and think how I was to put it."

I smiled again at this, and watched him as he fidgeted with his cigar somewhat nervously and uneasily.

"You saw the Princess there, didn't you? I don't know, but I heard something or other; and, anyway, she must have been speaking to—to someone who spoke to me. Doesn't that sound rather ridiculous?"

But I scarcely heard his question. The reference to the Princess Christina had set my thoughts whirling at the bare idea that he was in some remote way a messenger from her, and that she was sufficiently in-

terested in me to make these indirect inquiries as to my movements and intentions.

"Yes, I saw the Princess last night," I said, breaking the pause. "Do you come from her?" I was astonished at the steadiness of the tone in which I spoke.

"Well, yes; but yet not exactly—oh, hang it all, I'd better out with it. I shall only make a mess of things;" and he laughed gaily, and flushed. "I came to you mainly because I was asked to do so by Mademoiselle Broumoff, who is one of her closest companions; and Mademoiselle Broumoff and I are, in fact, betrothed. Now you've got it, Count; and that's why I fiddled about just now, and didn't know quite what to say."

"I am much mistaken if Mademoiselle Broumoff, whose acquaintance I shall hope to make, is not an exceedingly fortunate girl, lieutenant; and I speak without the least affectation when I say that your news interests me deeply."

It did, in all truth. To have as a friend someone who was in the close confidence of the Princess herself, was a stroke of good fortune which I could indeed appreciate; and I resolved to bind this handsome young officer to me by all possible bonds.

"The one commission is an antidote to the other, at any rate, I hope," said Spernow; "and if it's any gratification to you to know it, you can rest assured that the Princess takes a lively interest in you, and for some reason or other feels herself under some sort of obligation to you. Frankly, I don't know what it is; but I do know there are plenty of our fellows who'd like to stand in your shoes in such a thing. You can't think how we worship that woman!" he cried, with a flash of sudden enthusiasm.

"I can think of no cause for such a feeling of obligation," said I, speaking indifferently to hide the tingling glow of delight at his words.

"Oh, of course. By Jove, I was nearly forgetting," he exclaimed, with a jerk, as he plunged his hand into his pocket and brought out a packet of papers. "Are you engaged for to-morrow night?"

"I? No indeed."

"Then you'll be able to come all right. I've got you a card for the ball at the Assembly. It's a big do; and most of the folks worth knowing will be there, if you want to know them."

"Is this from the General?"

"Well, not exactly, though he'll be glad enough for you to go. Mademoiselle Broumoff put me up to it."

"Then I may have the pleasure of seeing her there?"

"Of course, she's going, rather; and the Princess too. You'll come?"

"I shall be very pleased. It is just the chance I shall welcome."

Was this another little personal attention from the Princess, or merely a development of the policy of winning me to the Russian side? I was turning this over, and thinking how far I could get the answer from Spernow, when a servant came to say that the two officers who had called earlier in the day had returned.

I told the man to show them in, and explained matters to Spernow. He knew them, he said, but not their errand.

This was soon explained, and caused me no little surprise.

"We come from Lieutenant Ristich," said Captain Dimitrieff, speaking very formally and stiffly.

"And who is Lieutenant Ristich?" I asked. "I do not know him."

"You met yesterday at General Kolfort's house, and he considers that you insulted him. Will you be good enough to tell me who will act for you? The facts have been explained to me."

"Do you mean that the lieutenant wishes to force a quarrel upon me? I remember him now, of course; but I know of no insult, and certainly I have no quarrel with him."

The captain raised his eyebrows and shrugged his shoulders.

"Shall I say, then, that you prefer to apologise?" he asked, superciliously.

"Certainly not," I returned sharply, stung by his manner. "What I mean is that nothing passed which need make another encounter between us necessary."

"That is an *impasse*."

"I cannot help that," said I, indifferently.

"Well, you must either fight, sir, or refuse to fight; and in the latter case the lieutenant says he will be driven to the extreme course of publicly insulting you."

"This is monstrous," I answered angrily. "It is nothing less than forcing a quarrel upon me, as I say. But if that is the lieutenant's mood, and he wishes for another lesson in swordsmanship, I'll give it him. I have but very few friends here in Sofia, but the matter shall be arranged without delay. Perhaps——" I looked across at Spernow.

"Can I be of any assistance, Count?" he said, eagerly.

"I shall be deeply obliged if you will. Perhaps these gentlemen will retire to another room for a few

minutes, and then you can wait on them, and matters can be put in course before they leave the hotel."

They went, and I explained all that was necessary to Spernow, telling him that I attached little importance to the affair, and that I had already proved myself much more than a match for the lieutenant with the sword; that as the challenged party I should choose swords; but that the conditions were to be made as little stringent as possible, so that the fight could be stopped as soon as either was wounded, however slightly.

He went away then, and when he returned said that he had made all arrangements, and that we were to meet early the next morning at a spot just outside the town, often used for the purpose.

"Mademoiselle Broumoff will take a keen interest in this business, Count," he said, as he was leaving me later. "Lieutenant Ristich is an object of her deepest hatred; and so will the Princess for the matter of that. He is no favourite of hers either."

"You will say nothing, of course, until it is over; and you will get a friend to act with you, and perhaps you will both breakfast with me afterwards."

"With pleasure. You take it coolly, Count," he said as we shook hands.

CHAPTER VI

THE DUEL, AND AFTER

IT was a glorious morning, the air crisp, fresh and clear, when I rose early, and found Spernow waiting for me in the courtyard of the hotel. He introduced his friend, Captain Zoiloff, who would act as my other second in the duel.

"I got Zoiloff to come because he's well up in these matters," said Spernow, "and I'm not. He'll keep us right."

I did not take the affair of the duel seriously ; my bout with Ristich at the General's house had shown me my greater skill, and I had no intention of even wounding him seriously, and no fear whatever that he would be able to touch me. I said as much to my companions as we walked together to the ground.

"Ristich is very mad against you for some reason or other," said Spernow. "And he's a hare-brained chap, so I should look out."

"He is not much of a swordsman," put in Zoiloff, "but he has one or two clever strokes that have served him well enough in other affairs of this kind ;" and he went on to describe them. But he found me a somewhat inattentive listener, and after a short time the talk turned to other matters.

We were first on the ground, and Captain Zoiloff promptly set to work to choose the most suitable spot, and the positions which we should respectively take

up. He displayed a manifest relish for the task, and was evidently an old campaigner in this sort of thing.

He had scarcely concluded his work when the other party arrived, bringing with them a doctor. They saluted us formally, and without any delay the seconds consulted together, decided upon the ground, and selected the weapons.

While they were thus engaged Ristich and I stood apart, and I saw that he was very pale and moody-looking, glancing every now and again at me with patent ill-feeling and animosity.

"Ristich has got his marching orders," said Spernow to me, when he and Zoiloff came to explain what they had arranged.

"How do you mean?"

"He is being sent back to Russia, and leaves to-day."

"I heard him declare he wanted to go," said I.

"Yes, but not in semi-disgrace. He puts it down to you, and that's what makes him so bitter. They tell me he raged like a fiend when he heard it last night, and he means mischief."

I glanced across at him. He had thrown off his uniform, and I saw, too, that his sword-arm was bandaged. Till that moment I had forgotten all about the wound I had inflicted.

"Stay a moment," I cried to my seconds. "He is wounded. I can't fight a disabled man," and I told them what had occurred.

"That's his lookout," said Zoiloff, in a very business-like tone. "He is the challenger."

"I won't fight a cripple," I said resolutely; and at that they called the other seconds aside, and a long conference ensued, in the course of which Ristich was

more than once consulted. I saw him explaining matters to his seconds, and flourishing one of the rapiers to show that he could use it quite well.

"He insists that the fight must go on," said Zoiloff on his return to me, "and I really don't see that you can object."

"But it isn't fair," I protested. "Under ordinary circumstances, and with the full use of his arm, the man isn't my equal with the sword, and, disabled in that way, the thing's absurd."

"His point is that he has to leave Sofia, and that, as he is determined to fight you, he will have no other chance. I shouldn't insist, Count Benderoff, if I were in your place. It will only cause talk. The doctor has examined the wound and says Ristich is fit to fight, and he has shown us, as you may have seen, that he has complete command of his sword."

"It makes me appear ridiculous to fight a wounded man," I urged. "Try further protest, and say I will meet him anywhere at any time when he is well again. I will travel to Russia if necessary."

"I am afraid that we shall only get some sneering reply that you don't want to fight, or something of that sort."

"I would rather be sneered at for not fighting a wounded man than fight one," said I. "I will take care of my reputation." And they went across to repeat the protest and deliver the message.

It was as fruitless as the former one, and when Zoiloff returned he was very angry.

"I will not repeat his message," he said; "but it was most insulting. You must fight, Count. If we have any more conferences we shall only have more duels. I think you have acted most honourably; but,

believe me, you can only press this further at great risk to your name."

He spoke so earnestly, and Spernow joined with him, that I allowed myself to be persuaded, and threw off my coat and waistcoat and made ready.

We took up our positions under the shadow of some trees, and when my opponent was close to me the look of hate in his eyes, as they rested on mine, confirmed what Spernow had told me of his intention and desire to do his worst.

But from the moment when our blades crossed and the word was given us to engage, I knew that the issue must rest with me. Ristich attacked me immediately with great violence and impetuosity, in the hope of finishing the matter before his weakened strength should give out. I had no difficulty in defending myself, however, and, had I been in the same vengeful mood as he was, I could have run him through.

My object was not that. I wished merely to wound him slightly, or disarm him; and I tried two or three times to do the latter, though without success. I fought as coolly and warily as if we were in the school trying a bout with the foils, and this coolness aggravated my opponent intensely, so that he lost all self-control.

Watching patiently for my opportunity, I found it when he had made one of his reckless, angry thrusts, and with a quick counter I drove the point of my sword into his shoulder. Then I drew back instantly and threw up my weapon off the guard. Whether he saw this or not, or whether his rage blinded him to his wound and to all else besides, I know not, but instantly he thrust out his weapon with a blow aimed straight at my heart.

I saved myself only by springing back, while a shout of indignation came from Zoiloff.

"A foul stroke; I call you to witness, gentlemen, a foul and dastardly stroke," he cried, excitedly, as he rushed in and struck up my opponent's sword. "Count Benderoff has behaved splendidly, and if your sword had gone home, Lieutenant Ristich, it would have been murder. A most foul stroke."

In a moment he was the centre of a group, all as excited as himself. Ristich protested that he had not seen me draw back from the fight, that he had not felt that he was wounded, and that he was eager to continue the fight. But Zoiloff would not hear of it.

"I withdraw my man, certainly," I heard him say, and he brought matters to a dramatic conclusion. "I declare the stroke a foul one, foully dealt, and if anyone questions that, I am ready to make good my words now and here;" and he singled out Captain Dimitrieff and addressed him pointedly: "What say you, Captain?"

He looked very dangerous as he paused for an answer, and the Captain clearly had no wish for a quarrel with him.

"Of course, the fight is over," he answered, evasively.

"Exactly, and we'll leave it at that," said Zoiloff, drily, as he turned on his heel and came to me with Spernow. "I never saw a more dastardly thing. I wouldn't have believed even a Russian would have done such a thing." A speech that set me wondering.

"They won't cross Zoiloff," whispered Spernow to me as I was dressing, rapidly. "He's a demon at the business. I'm glad I brought him."

"What did he mean about 'even a Russian?'" I asked.

"He hates 'em as much as I do. I'll tell you another time," replied Spernow.

"I congratulate you, Count Benderoff, on a lucky escape. That man meant to murder you; and Dimitrieff ought to be ashamed of himself for not speaking out plainly. But they hang together in a way that's disgusting, these——" He checked himself suddenly, with a quick glance at me, as though he had said more than enough before a stranger.

"I hope he really did not know I was not on guard," I answered.

"I'm afraid it's a hope not much stouter than a spider's web;" and he laughed bitterly. "The man meant murder, and was mad when he saw you could hold him so easily. You use the sword like a master, Count—I should like to try the foils with you."

"Nothing would please me better than a few hints from you," said I, readily. "I am a good deal out of practice."

"Then I shouldn't care to play with you in earnest when you are in practice," was his deftly flattering reply. "If we are to quarrel, I'd better pray for it to be soon;" and his taciturn face broke into a smile.

"It's something to earn Zoiloff's praise in these things, Count," said Spernow, laughing. "He's generally as chary of it as a coy woman of her kisses."

"You are both breakfasting with me, I hope," I said, as we moved off the ground. "Then we can go round to the house I am getting ready, and, if you like, I can have my first lesson in the shooting gallery which I am having fitted up there."

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure; but unfortunately, as I told Spernow, I have an engagement which I cannot break," said Zoiloff. "But I can be

with you in about a couple of hours from now, and then I shall be at your service. I should like nothing better than to see your gallery." And we arranged it so.

While we were at breakfast I asked Spernow to tell me, as he had promised, how it was that so much hatred of the Russians existed among the very men who were on their side. Such a fact, if it were one, might have considerable influence upon me.

"I am the worst hand in the world at explaining things," he answered. "But it is quite true. We don't trust them, but we trust each other less, Count; that's about the size of it, I think. We must have some kind of steady leadership, and what is there here? Look at the men who are at the head of things, and what are they except a crowd of nobodies, risen from nowhere, and setting their course solely by the compass of self-interest. The needle points always in that direction, and all the rest goes running round it."

"But why trust Russia?"

"Why not? So far as we can see, the one steady influence in this country is directed by her. We hate Russia, but we are afraid of her; and where else can we look for any hope of help?"

"The Prince," I suggested.

"He is as powerless as his poorest subject, and he has round him a crew that are after nothing but their own personal ends. They yell about patriotism and independence and all the rest of it, but would sell themselves to-morrow to the highest bidder. They only don't sell themselves, because nobody thinks them worth buying. The only real power is wielded by Russia, and I suppose we think it's better to make friends in advance with what must be the controlling

hand in the country. It's not a very high game, is it—but where's a better? Men like Zoiloff would only too gladly jump at a chance of something better."

"And the Princess Christina?"

"Ah!" And his face lighted with enthusiasm. "We do all but worship her, not only for herself, but because we have come to believe she will in some way do what we want to see done—draw out the best that lies in Bulgarian life. She is truth itself, and right, justice, and honour are the cardinal articles of her faith."

I looked at him in surprise and began to see there was more in him than I had at first thought.

"You think more seriously of these matters than I had believed," I said.

"I?" and he laughed. "Ah, it does not do for us Bulgarians to let the Russians believe we take either our affairs or ourselves too earnestly. But some of us are sound enough in heart at least. Enough of politics, however; why should I bore you with them?" And he turned away to lighter topics, rattling off a dozen stories of the latest gossip and tittle-tattle about the society of the city.

I did not check him, for it struck me that he was anxious rather that I should retain my first impressions of him than begin to look on him as taking a serious interest in the affairs of the country.

After breakfast we went round to my house and I showed him the alterations I had made. He took the keenest interest in everything, declaring that my wealth would make me at once an important figure in Sofia, and that in a few weeks I should have half the city flocking to my doors.

When Zoiloff came we went to the shooting gallery,

and both the men were vastly interested in everything I had done. I had had the place fitted as a gymnasium, with every kind of appliance that money could provide; many of them sent specially from England.

"I did not know that you Roumanians cared for these things at all," said Zoiloff. "I have not done you justice."

"I am half an Englishman," I answered, purposely—for I had begun to alter radically the original part for which I had cast myself. If I was to stay in Sofia, I felt that I must wrap round me the protection which that magic formula, British subject, alone could give. The announcement surprised them both.

"Ah, that accounts for it," exclaimed Zoiloff. "You English are a wonderful people. But why do you come to Sofia? Pardon me, I have no right to put such a question," he added hastily.

"I am also half a Roumanian; and the freedom of Bulgaria is essential for the independence of that country."

I turned away as I spoke, and pretended not to notice the swift, shrewd look which both men turned upon me.

"I shall hope to know much more of you, Count Benderoff," said Zoiloff, with so much earnestness that I thought my words had touched the chord in him I intended.

"I think it is my turn to be surprised in you," said Spernow. "And I hope that we three may come to understand each other well."

Were these invitations from them both to speak more openly? I thought so, but felt that for the present I had said enough.

"Shall we try the foils?" I asked.

"With pleasure," agreed Zoiloff ; and while he was making ready he glanced round the spacious gallery and added : " What a magnificent hall you have here ; there is room to drill half a company of soldiers, as well as train a band of athletes ! "

" Yes," I answered with a laugh. " It would be a fine house for a revolutionary movement." And at this they both started, and again shot shrewd, searching glances at me ; but I was busy selecting the foils.

" You English are a wonderful people," said Zoiloff again, but this time very drily.

We set to work then with our fencing, and to my surprise, and much to Zoiloff's admiration, I proved slightly the better swordsman. He had not a spark of jealousy or envy in his composition, and when I had beaten him for the third or fourth bout in succession, he only laughed and said :

" I am your first recruit, Count ; and you are a master I am well content to work from—and follow."

" Good," exclaimed Spernow, " I will be the second—if you will have me, Count."

" My dear Spernow, I could wish no better friends or comrades in any work than you two." At this answer Zoiloff, taciturn and reserved though he was by nature, offered me his hand impulsively, and said with great earnestness, as I took it :

" Now I am sure we understand each other, and shall work together for the same cause, Count ;" and the warmth of his hand-grip told me that in him I should have a firm friend.

Spernow was not nearly so skilful a swordsman, and knew it ; but he was anxious to learn, and we arranged that we three should make a rule of meeting daily for such practice ; and when we were separating I said :

"As you can see, I take a great interest in these things, and I should like you to do me the favour of bringing with you such friends of yours as you think would like to come and would help us by taking an interest in the work here."

Zoiloff's dark eyes lighted meaningly as they held mine.

"You would soon have a large circle of friends, Count."

"Every friend of Bulgaria would be a friend of mine," I answered.

"You mean all that that implies?"

"I mean all that that implies; and the wider interpretation you give to it the better I shall be pleased."

"It should be a day of good omen for the country when your house is thrown open for that purpose. A party of really patriotic Bulgarians is no mere dream-project—though they will be young men, mostly. By Heavens, but I am glad Spernow induced me to go out with you this morning."

When they had gone, I stayed to think over all the chances which this unexpected turn of matters suggested. It might yet be checkmate indeed to Russian plans, if we could find the means to form such a party of young ardent patriots from within the very ranks of those supposed to be devoted to Russian interests. There were possibilities calculated to satisfy the wildest ambitions and effect the most drastic changes.

It would be a perilous task enough at the outset, for I could not doubt that, should the project get wind, as was most probable in that land of spies and treachery, General Kolfort would spare no efforts and stop at no measures to crush it under the wheels of his enormous power.

But it was worth the effort. To me it was infinitely more welcome than any secret counter-mining intrigue, such as I had had in contemplation. It would be a real sturdy stroke in the cause of freedom, and, if once successful, no man could tell how far or wide or deep its glorious effects might not be felt.

It roused me till the blood coursed quickly through my veins and my pulse beat with feverish throbs, for in it I saw the real interest and honour of the Princess Christina herself. The men who had been with me were both pledged to the eyelids to serve her, I knew; and I knew further that every man they brought to the house to join us would have the same enthusiasm in her behalf. Who could tell but that by these means I might yet be the agent to place her on the throne, but without the hampering restrictions of any Russian marriage?

This thought was whirling in my head as I walked back to my hotel, there to receive another startling surprise.

Some one was waiting to see me, had been waiting for two hours, on important business.

"I am Major Grueff, and am the bearer of a letter to Count Benderoff, of Radova. Have I the pleasure of speaking to him?"

"Yes, what is it?" I asked, concealing my surprise.

"His Highness has given you a captain's commission in the Sofia Regiment, Count, of which I am the Major in command, and has requested me to carry back your answer to this letter."

I opened it and found it a request that I should wait upon the Prince on the following day.

There was no doubt as to the meaning of this. It was the Countess Bokara's work; and as I penned my

reply, that I should gladly accept his command, I called to mind her declaration that our next meeting would be at the Prince's palace.

"I am glad to welcome you to the regiment, Count," said the major ; but he spoke in a tone I did not like, and I conceived an instinctive but invincible prejudice against him. "And, as I have been so long waiting, I will get you to excuse my hurrying away."

I did not attempt to stay him ; for I wished to be alone to think over this new development.

If I accepted the captaincy, what could it mean except that I committed myself to the Prince's side ? And this at the very moment when the other and vastly more congenial plan had begun to take shape in my mind.

I thought I could see again the alluring but cruel face of the Countess Bokara, and hear the ring of triumph in her voice as she had turned to me after her cold-blooded deed :

"Now you will have to join us ! "

CHAPTER VII

AT THE BALL

THE ball that night was a very brilliant affair, and when I arrived the rooms were already somewhat crowded. I found Spernow waiting for me near the entrance.

"You are a little late, Count; we began to fear that perhaps you were not coming. Mademoiselle Broumoff is anxious for me to present you at once. Will you come with me?"

As we threaded our way through the throng, he told me the names of many of those present, but I was looking everywhere for the Princess, and felt disappointed at not seeing her.

Mademoiselle Broumoff was sitting alone in a corner at the far end, and I saw her eyes light up as she caught sight of us. She was not pretty, but her face was bright and clever, with an ever-changing play of expression that made it very attractive; while a pair of deeply set thoughtful eyes spoke of great intelligence.

As soon as I had been presented, she made a place for me at her side and sent Spernow away with a reminder that he had a number of duty dances with important partners.

"You have kept him from them so long, Count, that he will have a busy time," she said with a smile.

"I have kept him? I have but this minute arrived."

"Of course, that is the reason. I had commissioned him to bring you straight to me, and you are late."

"I did not know that such an honour was depending on my arrival, or I would have been earlier," I said with a bow.

"I have been most anxious, and half feared you meant to disappoint us;" and in a light strain we chatted pleasantly. I soon perceived that my companion was bent upon creating a favourable impression, while on my side I was not less desirous of making a friend of one who was so close an intimate of the Princess. We danced the next waltz together, and at the close of it she asked me to lead her to one of the conservatories.

I observed that she was careful to select a quiet corner, where we could speak without fear of being overheard, and after a moment's pause she said earnestly:

"I have been really anxious to know you, Count."

"I am flattered," I answered.

"No, not that," she replied impulsively, with a slight shake of the head. "I mean more than that. Michel has told me all that has passed between you—especially this morning at your new house. Captain Zoiloff is a man to trust implicitly, you know that?"

"I formed that opinion strongly," I said, beginning to wonder what she was going to say.

"Michel tells me you are half English. Is that a secret?"

"No, certainly not. We English are not afraid to own our nationality, as the actions of many of us show too prominently sometimes, I fear."

"But Englishmen of wealth do not commonly choose Bulgaria as a place of residence—at least not without

some strong motive." And her eyes searched my face for the truth.

"Eccentricity has never yet been denied to us."

"Is it in your case eccentricity—only?"

"I am also half a Roumanian," I said, repeating the answer I had given in the morning to Zoiloff.

"And the Roumanians are all but Russians."

"Is not the Princess Christina a Roumanian?" I retorted. "And also of the Russian Party here?"

"Do you think that?" she asked quickly, turning the battery of her eyes full on me again.

"What time or means have I had to learn how to distinguish between appearances and facts?"

She laughed—a very silvery, sweet laugh.

"You fence as cleverly with your tongue as with your sword, Count. What do you want to know?"

"Nothing that cannot be told me voluntarily, mademoiselle."

"Why do we all trust you instinctively?" she asked. A quiet feminine thrust.

"I am happy if you do," I parried; and at the reply she shrugged her shoulders, and a shadow of impatience crossed her expressive face.

There was a pause, in which she looked down and played with her fan.

"We wish to trust you entirely," she said next, in a low, earnest voice. "The Princess wishes it." A swift glance shot up to notice the effect of this.

"I have no more earnest wish in life than to serve the Princess," I declared, the words coming from my heart.

"To serve her is to serve the cause of freedom and the cause of Bulgaria."

"Freedom as the Russians interpret it?"

"Freedom as the English love it," she answered, in a tone that vibrated with enthusiasm, her eyes flashing and her cheeks colouring. "The freedom that we true Bulgarians read and dream of, crave and would die for," she added, her voice deep and low with feeling.

A long pause followed, in which my thoughts were busy. Had the Princess Christina inspired this feeling, and was this strange girl an agent in pressing me to join such a movement? My heart beat fast at the thought.

"Is that a cause you would serve, Count?" she asked.

"These are strange things to hear from those whom I find all gathered under the wings of the Russian Eagle!" I said cautiously.

"There may be stranger yet to hear," she returned sharply.

"The Prince who is on your throne is no friend of Russia."

"The Prince has never gained the confidence of true Bulgarians. The men he keeps about him are patriots in nothing but name; and he has neither the wit to winnow the false from the true, nor the courage to set the false at defiance."

"You would play for a big stake?"

"And make our lives the counters. Is not that enough?" The retort was given with a show of bitterness. "You English are cold and calculating."

"We are cautious, certainly."

"Yet you should hate the Russians."

"No one has accused us of loving them."

She made another pause before replying:

"Perhaps I have been too rash and have surprised you; but we thought from what Michel told me of

what passed this morning at your house, that—well, that all was as we wished, and that you were already with us.”

“You thought this?” I asked, purposely putting an emphasis on the pronoun. She understood me and smiled.

“The Princess and I both thought it,” and I heard this with delight.

“You did not hear more than the truth, mademoiselle.”

“Then we are to be friends in it all?” she cried; and her face was radiant with pleasure as she turned her eyes once more full upon me.

“Show me how I can serve the Princess, and I will do it with my whole heart, and if need be with my life.”

“She will be here to-night, and you can tell her. The news will have the pleasanter savour coming direct from you.”

She knew how to fire me, and I would have given half my fortune to have known what lay behind the meaning glance of her eyes, which started thoughts I would not silence, and yet dared not indulge.

As I sat there, half bewildered, I saw a tall, fair, truculent-looking man forcing his way arrogantly among the people and coming in our direction, while he looked about him on all sides in search of someone.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“A man to fear, Count—the worst enemy we have, Duke Sergius. A man whose eyes we have always to blind.”

At that moment he caught sight of my companion and he hurried his pace, a heavy frown darkening his sensual, insolent features.

"I have had much trouble in finding you, mademoiselle. I might almost have thought you were trying to avoid me. The waltz we were to dance together has commenced."

Mademoiselle Broumoff smiled ingenuously at him and said :

"I scarcely thought you were in earnest when you put my name on your programme. You do not generally honour me by remembering it."

"I have something particular to ask you," he replied, with such selfish insolence that I could have kicked him. He caught something of this expression in my face as he looked casually at me, and his glance deepened into a steady stare as he tried to frown me down. But I returned his look with one in which I tried to convey some of the dislike and contempt I felt at his attitude, and, perceiving it, mademoiselle rose hastily, put herself between us, and drew his attention by placing her hand on his arm and saying, as she bowed to me :

"I am ready now."

As they moved off I heard him ask who I was, but could not catch the reply.

I hated the look of the man, and tried to persuade myself that the feeling was not in any way prompted by what I knew about his design upon the Princess Christina. If I had before needed any inducement to drive me into opposition to him, my hasty prejudice would have supplied it; and I sat now absorbed in thought, chewing the cud of all that had passed between the Princess's staunch little emissary and myself, and wishing for the hour and the means to thwart him. They would come, I felt, and I nursed my anger and fed my animosity as I sat there piecing together

the threads of the net that was closing round me, and drawing me forward upon a path that would lead I could not say whither.

Spernow's voice roused me.

"You are not dancing, Count. Won't you let me find you some partners? There are plenty here who wish to know you. Well, have you and Nathalie had an interesting conversation?" he asked in a lower voice, dropping into the seat at my side. "I know how anxious she was for it."

"I hope great things from it," I answered.

"Are you to be presented to the Princess?"

I looked at him in surprise, not understanding the question.

"Oh, the presentation was to hinge upon the result of your talk with her."

"Then probably I shall be presented," I returned, smiling.

"Good, very good ; nothing could be better, indeed. Come, then, and let us go in search of partners. But don't fill up your card, you may need a gap or two in it presently." I guessed his meaning, but said nothing as I went with him back to the dancing hall, was introduced to several people, and for an hour danced and chatted as though I had no other object in life.

I was not too much engrossed by my partners, however, to miss the entrance of the Princess Christina, and more than once when I passed close to her in the course of a dance I caught her gaze fixed upon me with evident interest. Once especially was I certain of this, when she and Mademoiselle Broumoff were in close and earnest conversation ; and it was with a thrill of pleasure that I felt that I was the subject of their talk.

Soon after this Spernow came to me and said that the Princess was anxious that I should be presented to her; and with a fast-quickening pulse I went with him to where she and her companion were sitting.

Almost directly I had made my bow Mademoiselle Broumoff rose and said to Spernow:

"This is our dance, Michel," and as the pair went away I took her place by the side of the beautiful woman who exercised so overpowering a fascination upon me.

"A more conventional meeting than our first, Count," she said.

"A very brilliant scene," I replied naïvely; for now that I was alone with her I felt like a tongue-tied clown. My stupid answer surprised her, as well it might, and I saw a look of perplexity cross her face. After an awkward pause, I added: "Your coming then saved my life."

"Scarcely that; but I have since heard the particulars of that matter, and I have been ashamed that you should have suffered such treatment in my name. I am glad of an opportunity of assuring you of my regret."

"I would gladly suffer much worse on your behalf," I blurted out nervously, and the answer brought another pause, during which I struggled hard to overcome my embarrassment and self-consciousness. I desired above all things in the world to win the favour of my companion, and yet I sat like a fool, at a loss for the mere commonplaces of conversation. She would think me a dolt or an idiot.

How long my stupid silence would have lasted I cannot tell; but the Princess in a movement of her fan dropped her dance card, and, in returning it to her

I looked up, and caught her eyes upon me lighted with a rare smile.

"Do you return it to me without your name upon it?" she asked.

"May I have the honour?" I murmured.

"What is a ball for, but dancing?" she smiled. "But if you write your name there it will be a sign and token."

"Of what?" I asked stupidly.

"Of much that my dear little friend Mademoiselle Broumoff tells me she has said to you to-night."

"What is a ball for, but dancing?" I repeated her words as I took the card and wrote my initials against a waltz. "It will make the dance memorable to me," I added, under my breath.

"I shall read it for one thing as a token that you have acquitted me of all responsibility for the scene at General Kolfort's house."

"There was no need for any token of that, Princess," I replied, beginning to shake off my paralysing nervousness.

"And of the rest?"

"That I desire nothing better than to be enrolled among your friends." I spoke from my heart then, and the words pleased her.

"There may be many dangers, and more difficulties."

"I am prepared for both—if I can serve you." I looked straight at her for the first time, and her eyes fell.

"I could have no more welcome friend," she said softly.

This time the pause that followed was due as much to her embarrassment as to mine, and I noted this with a touch of delight.

"You had a long conference with General Kolfort?" she asked, a minute later.

"Yes; he threatened me with all the power of his enmity if I did not decide to ally myself on his side, and gave me a week in which to do so or leave the country."

"And your decision?" she asked quickly.

"Has been made to-night."

"To do what?"

"To devote myself without reserve to your interests."

"I am glad—and proud."

No answer that she could have made could have filled me with more supreme pleasure.

"I had feared a quite different result from news which reached me to-day. You know your affairs are pretty freely discussed just now."

"What news was that?"

"I heard that you had received a captain's commission in the Prince's own household regiment. Is that so?"

"It was unsolicited by me; and I learnt it only to-day. I have not yet accepted it. I am to see His Highness to-morrow."

"You will find him a good man, but sorely distracted by doubts and fears. All willing to serve Bulgaria; but afraid of Russian influence, and unable to choose good advisers here. His nerves have been shaken by the plots against his life, and his judgment shattered till he cannot appraise the men about him. Were matters different he would be an ideal ruler for us."

"And what of the other influences round him?" I asked guardedly; but she understood me and replied openly:

"You mean the woman whose life you saved. I cannot understand her. Her ruling passion seems to be her hate of me. And a woman with a passion, be it jealousy, hate, or love, is no safe guide." I detected a note of sadness in her tone. "You ran a great risk that night, Count, a fearful risk."

"There was little danger that I saw."

"I do not mean the seen danger; that may have been small for a man whose bravery and skill with weapons are such as yours. But the unseen dangers—the consequences that may always pursue and overtake you when you least think of them. It is such terrible deeds as that which fill me with dismay and dread of the future. How can a cause hope to prosper, the foundations of which are secret murder, implacable violence, and such desperate bloodshed? And these things are done in my name, and apparently with my sanction. Did not General Kolfort threaten you with the consequences of your act?"

"Yes, but I do not take his threats too seriously. It is one thing to assassinate a Bulgarian woman, another to murder a British subject."

"When you have been longer in this distracted country you will see the distinction differently. But we must talk no longer in this strain here. Too many eyes are upon us and too many ears open. Balls are for dancing, Count," she added in a light tone and with a smile.

I understood that I was dismissed, and rose and walked away. I was in no mood for dancing, and I went into one of the conservatories to think over what had passed between us, and remained there until it was time to claim her for the waltz she had promised me.

We danced it almost in silence, save for a common-

place or two about the ball and the people present ; but at the close she said earnestly :

“ I am leaving almost directly. I shall be at home to-morrow afternoon, and shall be interested to know your impressions of the Prince.” Then in a lower voice : “ You must be careful, Count. Accept the commission in the regiment ; but do not pledge yourself to His Highness’s service. You will not find it necessary. Maintain as strict a neutrality as possible ; and then see General Kolfort and tell him what you are doing. It might be well to see him before you go to the Palace. Emphasise the fact of your British nationality. You have a difficult part to play ; how difficult you do not yet see, perhaps. But your success and your safety will always be of the deepest concern to me. Remember that, always.”

She spoke earnestly, and in her eyes, as I glanced into them, I saw again that look of solicitude which at our previous meeting had moved me so strangely.

And the sweetness of her voice, the touch of her hand, and the tender softness of her glance, were haunting me all through the night, and urging me to I know not what strenuous efforts in her behalf.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE PALACE

THE next morning I was up early and went for a long ride. It was likely to be a critical day for me, and I had to try and look well ahead to see where I was being carried by the new set of the tide in my affairs.

My conversation with the Princess Christina had had a great effect upon me. For one thing it had made me more resolved than ever to devote myself to her, whatever might be the consequences; but her words of warning, her evident belief that there was danger for me, and above all her pleasure at my declaration of loyalty to her, had roused all my instincts of caution, while they had strengthened my feelings towards her.

She was shrewd, clear-cut in her views of men and things, devoted to the cause of Bulgaria, and openly allied to the Russian party, whose rough and violent methods she had nevertheless so indignantly decried. What then was her object? Was she playing the doubly hazardous game of attempting to use the Russian influence and power for an end opposed to theirs?

That was the only solution I could see. And it was one which I knew must involve her in a course fraught with such peril, that only a woman of iron nerve and implacable will could contemplate it without fear. And yet she was brave enough to take such a course without, so far as I knew, a single man trained in state-

craft and intrigue to help her. Could I take such a *rôle*? The mere thought of the possibility filled me with enthusiasm not unmingled with much embarrassment.

If my surmise was right, I felt that her scheme was just that which our Foreign Office would do their utmost to assist; and, in helping her to gain the throne on such terms, I should be fulfilling in the best possible way the object of my presence in the country. But I knew, too, that open help from the British Government was impossible. That had been made unmistakably plain to me, and I must make it equally clear to her. Her advice to make the most of my British nationality might have been prompted by a belief that our Government would help her, and I must show her the groundlessness of any such hope.

At the same time, the course she had indicated agreed best with my own views: to maintain an open neutrality between the contending sections while devoting myself to her interests. Her whole object must be put fully before me, however; and I resolved to speak very frankly that afternoon. The prospect of the close association with her was infinitely alluring, and it required more than a single effort to drag my thoughts away from dwelling upon this to the more practical consideration of other matters. To secure that friendship I would willingly venture all that I had in the world; and I had but to think of it for my heart to be thrilled and my senses dazzled.

But what of the Duke Sergius and the story of the secret betrothal? The man was a selfish, sensual brute, as I had seen for myself. Was it possible that she would even go to the length of sacrificing herself in a marriage with such a man to secure her end? Then I

recalled a sentence of Mademoiselle Broumoff's: "A man whose eyes we have always to blind;" and I repeated it over and over again, till at last I grew to read it by the light of my own wild, vague thoughts and hopes—that there was no betrothal, but that the pretended agreement to it was a part of the subtler plot which my Princess was weaving. The thought of such a betrothal was maddening to me, and I worked myself up until I thought I would rather pick a quarrel with him and run him through the heart than see her condemned to be the wife of such a brute.

I was cooler, however, when I returned to my hotel, and my wits were clear and wary enough as I set out for General Kolfort's house. I was well received, but he made haste to show me that he knew already of the fact of my captain's commission.

"I am glad to see you, Count Benderoff—or shall I say Captain?"

"Choose your own form of salutation, General. It was of that matter I came to see you," I returned.

"Is that all?"

"All?" I asked, as if in astonishment.

"Do you accept the commission in the service of the Prince—or rather of the lady who has offered it you—or in mine?"

"In neither; but as an honour offered to a rich British subject who has taken up permanent residence in Sofia." His shrewd old eyes lighted at this reply, which he had certainly not expected.

"So that is your line, eh?" he said drily. "Considering that they know nothing of the Hon. Mr. Winthrop's existence, they have acted a little by accident in honouring a British subject. Don't you think so?"

I smiled. "At any rate they have made me the offer, and I have decided to accept it. But I preferred to come and tell you, after our interesting little conversation of three days ago."

"That means, then, you will remain in Sofia?"

"My house is nearly ready for my occupation, and I shall hope to be honoured by your presence in it as my guest."

"Umph! You have not forgotten our conversation, I see."

"It was scarcely one to be forgotten."

"And I understand you claim the rights of a British subject."

"I am half a Roumanian, General, with considerable possessions there," I returned, equivocally.

"You are a very ambitious, or a very reckless, or a very clever young man, Count. You have thought over your course well?"

"I am not given to act on impulse."

"Yet cleverer men than you have tried unsuccessfully the dangerous policy of attempting to ride on two horses at once."

"I can but fail," I answered, indifferently.

"Then you decline to enrol yourself in my service?"

"I neither decline nor accept, General." The reply was unwelcome, and he sat a moment with brows knitted.

"You will fail, sir, as certainly as you make the attempt. But I must know, in view of future possibilities, whether you claim the status of a British subject or that of a Roumanian Count, or whether, again, I am to regard you merely as a captain in a Bulgarian regiment."

"I shall be in the unique position of enjoying all three," said I, and noticed with some amusement the

effect of this answer ; and then added with a laugh, and in a light tone : " I don't expect you to take me too seriously, General Kolfort."

" If you are a British subject, I can ask your Government to recall you ; if a Roumanian Count, I can use other influence to deal with you ; while, if you are merely a Bulgarian officer, you will be responsible to me for the deed which you have already committed." His tone was tense, concentrated, and full of earnestness. " Understand me ; I do not alter. If you will not join me, you shall not stay in Bulgaria. I am not to be trifled with."

" I can appreciate that, for you have already had my correspondence tampered with, in order to prevent certain news reaching England. I have committed no act for which I am not quite prepared to answer—openly ; and all I demand is that fair play which we English claim as the right of all—whether English, Roumanian, or Bulgarian."

He listened to this with a grim smile on his hard face.

" You mean that you are ready to risk breaking yourself on the wheel. Very well ; I confess I looked for a somewhat different decision, judging by what has passed in the last two days—your conversations with various people ; but remember, and, indeed, you are not likely to forget, what I have told you is my firm resolve. If you stay, you must join us."

I left him then, feeling that I had created pretty much the impression I desired—that, in dealing with me, he would have to regard me as a British subject ; and that, coupled with the fact of my increasingly close relations with the Princess and those about her, would suffice to secure my safety for a time.

With the reigning Prince I was at a loss what line to

take. It was difficult to decide beforehand ; but I was resolved to go to the length of refusing the captaincy in the regiment if the conditions attached to its acceptance were in any way embarrassing to my freedom.

But my interview with him was a surprise to me.

He received me alone, and spoke with a freedom I had not expected, giving as the reason for his attitude my rescue of the Countess Bokara ; and when I told him as I did, for there was now no longer any reason for concealing the fact, that I was an Englishman, his frankness increased. He jumped to the conclusion that I had some sort of credentials from the British Government, and it was only with difficulty that I disabused him of the idea.

He had the most engaging personality of any man I ever met. He was strikingly handsome ; every movement was marked by a courtly but unstudied and natural grace ; his voice was toned in perfect accord with his courteous and kindly bearing ; and his manner so sympathetically receptive as to impress you with the conviction that all you said had the utmost interest and importance for him. A courtier to the finger-tips, and yet withal a prince, it was impossible not to be charmed with him. I might have been his most intimate friend instead of the merest stranger who had come to thank him for a favour just bestowed. There was something lacking, however—strength ; and therein, without doubt, lay the secret of his failure.

“What reason can a wealthy Englishman have for settling in a place like this, unless he bears a commission of some kind ?” he asked, while indulging his hope that I was indeed charged with the duty of aiding him.

“Had I such a mission, your Highness, should I not have come straight to you ?”

"I suppose so, but yet it seems strange. I suppose they know in England how matters are with me, and what must eventually happen if nothing is done."

"All Europe knows of the difficulties of your position," I answered diplomatically.

"And all Europe does nothing but look on with folded hands, leaving me helpless to kick against the pricks. Do they think I bear a charmed life to withstand for ever the plots against my life that are being daily formed, and that I can go on for ever avoiding the poison or the dagger or the bullet that my enemies have ever in readiness for me? Do they take me for a zealot so tired of living that I am willing to keep my life always on offer to the first hand daring and shrewd enough to take it? And all this for a freedom which they mouth about and will not help, and for a people who have been corrupted to hate me, though I have doubled their country, led them to victory, and saved them from overwhelming disasters. By Heaven! the ingratitude of this people is as colossal as their selfishness."

I said nothing, and in a moment his bitterness passed, and he smiled.

"This is poor hearing for one who has come generously to offer me his services, and who has already placed me under a load of obligation. But at least I will be frank with you, Count Benderoff. I can give you this commission, give it gladly, and welcome you for what I believe you to be—an honourable man; but your services are of no use to me. They come too late—too late."

"I do not understand your Highness."

"It shall not be for want of plain dealing with you, then. The dear friend whose life you saved, and who

has brought you to me, is urging—the impossible. She does not know it, or cannot realise it, or will not—what you will; but, mark me well, my days in this ungrateful country are numbered. You will not use the information I give you—but I have resolved to abdicate.”

“To abdicate?” I cried, for this was news indeed.

“Yes; to abdicate. That is my fixed and irrevocable resolve. Had you brought me the promise of help from England, I would stay and fight it out, and strive to realise those high hopes with which, under God, I declare I accepted the throne. But what can I do alone, or almost alone, against a people who plot and plan to depose or murder me, who have tired already of the puppet ruler which other Powers imposed upon them, and against the cursed canker of this Russian intrigue? In all the land I cannot now tell who is friend and who foe. In my very household the air reeks with conspiracy and intrigue. I know not whether any man I meet by chance may not be sent to do murder. I never lie down at night without wondering whether I shall see the next morning’s sun. I never taste a meal without the thought of poison. I never speak a word without the expectation that it will be carried to the ears of my implacable and ruthless foes. And never a sun rises and sets again without I know that the deadly work of corruption has been carried a stage farther.”

“Such thoughts as these, your Highness, grow by brooding.”

“Good God, man, they are the natural germs with which this Eastern air is crowded and polluted. No, no; these are no idle fears. Russia is relentless, and I am powerless to resist her. I will not be her tool. I could stay in safety and in what the world calls pomp

and honour, a great Prince, if I would but stoop to do her bidding. I will not ; and therefore my choice to abdicate or die. Would God it could have been different !”

I was silent in the rush of thoughts these utterances roused.

“ You will not tell the Countess Bokara this? It is my grief, the bitterest irony of all my position, that I am driven thus to mislead the one friend who has been staunch to me, the truest friend God ever gave to a disappointed man, a foiled and thwarted Prince. I have told you—it will, indeed, be public knowledge in a few weeks from now, and Europe will reap the crop which her vacillation has sown—that you may not be buoyed up with false hopes from this grant of the commission. It would be a Greek gift, indeed, did I not tell you the truth—that you have nothing to hope from it. I can guess, of course, what the result will be. You will be drawn to the Russian net. That is a vortex which sucks in everything.”

“ What is that ? ”

I turned like a needle to the magnet as I heard the ringing tones of the Countess Bokara, who had entered the room unknown to us.

“ Who will join the Russian party—you, Count Benderoff ? ” she cried eagerly, almost fiercely, as she came quickly forward. “ No. Prince, I will answer for him. He dare not,” she added.

“ How much did you hear, Anna ? ” he asked rather uneasily.

“ Enough to rouse my indignation, that was all.”

“ I was telling the Count that there is no hope to be gained in my service, and there is but one side here for a man of action.”

"Prince, Prince, why will you always damp the enthusiasm of those who would be your friends and adherents? Why this constant tone of depression? These everlasting fears and forebodings? There is no cause for them, Count. We are on the eve of a stroke that will change everything—everything—and foil these coward traitors and restore in all its former strength the Prince's influence. There is no monopoly of craft and guile in these Russians! A clear head, a strong hand, a loyal heart, and a daring sword, can change all. We are not so hopeless but that a clever *coup* can save our cause and make us once again all-powerful."

The Prince threw up his hands with a gesture of weakness.

"It is too late," he murmured, despondently. "Too late."

"It shall never be too late while I live," she cried, desperately. "It shall never be said that you were beaten by a woman. Force her from the path, by fair means or foul—and forced she shall be—and all the flimsy superstructure of this clumsy plot falls like a shattered dream. Never shall Bulgaria be crushed beneath that woman's heel while I have strength in my right arm, or there remains a knife or a bullet in all the land. I swear it."

She uttered the vengeful words with all the vehement force of her violent temper, and as I looked at her I could see the thoughts of murder lighting her strained, glowing features, and brightly gleaming eyes.

But while they stirred repugnance in me they seemed only to add to the Prince's despondency.

"There has been too much blood shed already," he said, in a tone of rebuke.

"Too much; aye, so much that one woman's life



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more will make no difference. So they thought when they planned that mine should be the life—and shall I be softer than they ?”

The Prince looked at me with an expression I was quick to read, and I made a movement as if to leave.

“ I shall see you again shortly, Count, and you will take up your military duties at your early convenience. Meanwhile, I depend upon your discretion. All that you have heard here is for yourself alone.”

“ Absolutely. I understand,” I answered, and took my leave.

“ You cannot go like this,” broke in the Countess. “ I have yet much to say to you. I need your advice and help.”

“ Madame, I have urgent matters that call for attention immediately,” I replied, and the Prince thanked me with a look.

“ And are not these matters urgent ?” she cried, indignantly.

“ The Count has my permission to retire,” said the Prince, with sudden dignity.

“ When do you return, sir ?” asked the Countess. “ I must see you at once. I cannot brook delay. I am on fire when I think of all you must help me to achieve.”

“ My duties will bring me here constantly ;” and as I withdrew I could not decide whether my admiration of her courage and staunchness to the Prince or my loathing of the deadly methods by which she was prepared to prove it were the greater. Admirable as a friend, she was hateful as a woman ; and as she watched me go she appeared like a beautiful dangerous fiend, till her face turned to the Prince and her eyes glowed with the intense love for him which was the inspiring passion of her strange, reckless nature.

CHAPTER IX

"I HAVE UNBOUNDED FAITH IN YOU"

ALL my impressions of the interview with the Prince were quickly overshadowed by the one overpowering fear that the Princess was in imminent personal danger from the fury of the Countess Bokara. The Princess was regarded by her as the central pivot on which the whole Russian intrigue turned, and to take her life was the openly avowed object of that dangerous woman's passion.

That any attempt would be subtly planned and fearlessly carried out I knew well enough, and it was for the perfecting of such a scheme that she sought my help. This was indeed the crowning irony of the situation. I, who would give my life to save the Princess's, was to be this reckless fury's accomplice in a plot to murder her, in order to keep on the throne a Prince who had solemnly declared to me his unalterable decision to resign it.

Yet there was one ray of consolation. It was probable that I should be able to hold her scheme in check long enough to secure the safety of her intended victim, and I could at once urge upon the latter the necessity for the greatest caution. It was with this thought in my mind that I made my visit to the Princess in the afternoon.

Her house was a large one standing by itself in the

centre of the town, and I scanned it curiously. I noticed with satisfaction that great precautions had been taken. All the windows in the lower part were barred heavily; and the defences might have been planned with the express view of preventing just such an attempt as was in contemplation. The Russians had obviously done the work, knowing the need for guarding jealously the woman on whom so much depended.

On that score I had no apprehensions, therefore, and I resolved to question the Princess closely as to the state of affairs within, and whether she was absolutely sure of those who formed her household.

She received me very graciously.

"Your interview with the Prince has made you thoughtful, Count," she said, after a few minutes. "Was my forecast right? and what have you done?"

"I have accepted the commission in his regiment, but I have not pledged myself to support his cause—indeed, he said that I should probably find myself bound in the end to commit myself to the Russian party."

"It is singular that a man who showed himself so brave, and at first so capable, should be unable to read what is as plain as a book to other people."

"His reading is that the one possible future for the country is for it to pass into the power of Russia."

"I know that. It is his besetting weakness." She said this very thoughtfully, and then her face and eyes lighted as she added with vehemence: "And it is wrong—utterly and wholly wrong. The merest counsel of despair. By the help of Heaven we will live to prove it so; and if I have not counted on you in vain, you shall help us in the glorious work."

She turned her eyes upon me with a look that infected me with her enthusiasm. "You will help us, will you not?"

"With everything I possess, even to my life."

"I know it; I am sure of you. Would to heaven we had more men like you with us! I am going to trust you—put perhaps our lives in your keeping, for I know well enough the dangers of the work. But I trust you—absolutely." She held out her hand as she said this with an air and tone of implicit confidence, and I carried her fingers to my lips.

"Show me how to help," I said, my voice unsteady with emotion.

"Openly we are all allied to the Russians in a scheme which is to make me the reigning Princess, independent of all Russian influence. This is the veil which hides their real intentions. Secretly there is an engagement that I shall become the wife of the Duke Sergius, admitting him to a half share of the throne, and thus Russianising it completely. To make sure of me, it is arranged that we be married secretly, the union only to be announced after my accession. The object for this is of course to bind me irrevocably to them beforehand; and it is expected that while I am seemingly independent, all that is national and patriotic in Bulgaria will be rallied to my support. We should thus get a firm hold of the throne and of all classes of the people without the suspicion of too great Russian predominance. Do you see that?"

I did; and my looks showed that I did not relish it.

"It is a shrewd scheme, no doubt," I said.

She gazed at me steadily, almost reproachfully, I thought. But I did not like the scheme, and would not pretend that I did.

“ Is it a plan you will help ? ” she asked. I was silent and cast my eyes on the ground.

“ Is it a plan you will help ? ” she repeated.

“ You place me in a position of great difficulty, Princess,” I replied, slowly.

“ Will you help me in it ? ” she repeated.

“ With such powerful influence behind you, you will not need my help that I can see,” I returned, ungraciously, for the scowling brutal face of Duke Sergius was in my thoughts.

Her eyes were still bent steadily upon me, and a side glance showed me their expression had changed.

“ You are not frank with me, Count Benderoff,” she said, after a pause ; and at that I looked up and said bluntly :

“ If I offend you I am sorry ; but I will not stir a finger to help the man you mean—the Duke Sergius.”

Her face was breaking into a smile, when she checked it, and I saw a faint wave of colour rise to her cheek.

“ What do you know of Duke Sergius ? ” she asked. Again a pause.

“ Little or nothing, Madame ; but I will not serve in any cause where his interests are to be advanced.”

“ Why do you not like him ? You knew I was betrothed to him ? ”

She seemed suddenly bent on rousing my temper against the man.

“ I had heard of it.”

“ Yet, knowing it, you have not hitherto refused to help me ! ” Was she playing on my passion, that she persisted in her questioning ? “ You must have some reasons,” she continued, when I remained silent ; “ what are they ? ” and to my astonishment the smile which

she had before checked now passed beyond control and lighted her face rarely.

"You must not press me for my reasons," I said quickly; and the light in her eyes may have reflected the thought behind it, for again the colour mantled her cheeks.

"Then you will not help me?" she said in a low voice that witched me.

"You? With my life!"

The passion in my tone made her cast down her eyes, till, with a still deeper colour on her face, she lifted them and said gently:

"Forgive me; I was but testing you. And if you blame me, think what store I may set upon an assurance of fidelity that is purely personal to me. Call it caprice if you will, a mere woman's caprice, that I should thus seek to probe your real thoughts and resolves."

"There was no need to test me where you were concerned," I replied; and again the earnestness of my tone appeared to embarrass her. In the short silence that followed I sat with but the loosest rein upon the hopes and thoughts that were so much to me.

"No; the Duke Sergius does not come into the scheme as we plan it," she said; "and I thought indeed that what Mademoiselle Broumoff told you would have made you understand this. I would do much for this country; and if it were necessary that I should marry him—which, thank God, it is not—I might force myself to go even to that extreme. But in my life there can be no thought of marriage. I should be baser than the base if, having taken this charge upon me, I should ever turn from it by any thought of myself."

She spoke in a tone of lofty exaltation, a strange contrast indeed to what she had termed her "mere woman's caprice;" and I held my peace.

"Our plan is this," she resumed: "to use the Russian ladder, and then kick it over. To make them pledge themselves before Europe to support me on the throne, and then to use the power of the throne for rallying the Bulgarians to defend themselves and their country against their real enemies."

"You have mapped out a dangerous counterplot, Princess; but I like it, and if I can help, I will. How will you prevent the secret marriage?"

"We shall have to leave that to be disposed of when the time comes. As you were warned, he is a man whose eyes we have ever to blind."

"Are you sure of the people about you?"

"Of some—indeed, of many; but it is in that you can be of such help to us. I have heard of the suggestions you made so guardedly, that your house shall be the rendezvous of the movement to which those shall be brought who are known to be true to the country, and can be trusted. Such a meeting-place will be invaluable, especially where, as in your case, there is a plausible excuse for any such gatherings."

"You mean?"

"We propose to form a kind of gymnasium club—at least, propose that you should form it among the young men of the city whom we can ascertain to be faithful. Of these men you will necessarily become the leader; so you see you will have an important part to play, my friend."

"It is shrewd," I said, perceiving at once its many possibilities, as I recalled Zoiloff's words. "But how far are your plans advanced? Time presses."

"Much farther advanced than you think. We have been working all the time this Russian scheme has been in progress, so that we should be ready when that reaches its climax. But matters will move faster now, and in a few weeks all should be prepared. It is a strong point that the very craft of General Kolfort itself has helped us. We have, as it were, a free hand for making our preparations. He is as anxious as we are that those Bulgarians who are opposed to the Prince, and would help me, but fear Russia, should be secured to us; and this has given us just the cover for our work that we needed. We shall triumph, Count, for the cause of truth is ours, and Bulgaria shall be free;" and her voice rang with earnestness.

I sat silent in thought for some moments.

"You have thought of the dangers to yourself?"

"I can but die, and where could one find a nobler end?" Her face shone with the light of willing martyrdom.

"You think the General has no suspicion?"

"He cannot have as yet. There will come a moment when his eyes will be opened, no doubt, and then the danger may be real enough. But I am prepared to face anything for the cause."

I thought of that moment, and my heart feared for her; but I knew of the other danger from that wild woman, the Countess Bokara; and I must put her on her guard.

"It is not of the dangers we must think, Count, but of the great end to be achieved," she added. "To dwell on nothing but risks may make cowards of the bravest."

"True; but we must at all events give enough heed to the dangers to be able to guard against them. Have



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you thought of the steps the Prince and those about him might take against you?"

"You may have influence with her," she answered, understanding me readily. "And I have had a half hope that you may be able to make her understand how hopeless are her efforts. Can you do this?"

"I am not hopeful. She is a woman of wild and vehement passions."

"She is mad; she hates me so violently that if she dared she would herself plunge a knife into my heart. She clings to the shadow of power which she wields through the Prince with all the tenacity of ambition venomned by malice. I know it, but I do not fear her," she said proudly. "She is the greatest enemy this country has, even in this hour when its enemies throng every street, and are found in every house. Daring, unscrupulous, reckless, and saturated with the lust of power, she would use the Prince for the pursuit of her own ends, and those only, however cleverly masked by a boasted love of the country."

The Princess was a very woman after all, I saw, for it was easy to read the personal dislike which breathed through her indignation.

"She may be very dangerous, Princess," I said warningly.

She turned swiftly and looked at me, reading in my voice my genuine alarm for her. After a moment, her face softened into a smile, and she put her hand on my arm.

"You are warning me, I see, against something you know but cannot tell me. I will not ask you. I will do more, for your sake, and to relieve your fears on my account. I will be very cautious. You have a most difficult part to fulfil at present; I understand that.

But I will guard against any such risks as you appear to contemplate. Your ready zeal for the cause is very welcome to me, Count—more welcome, perhaps, than I have been able to show you. For the sake of what you say, I will be very cautious.”

Her eyes rested a moment on my face, holding me in a thrall of silent admiration. Then she added sweetly: “But you must not let your fears for me print themselves so legibly on your face. We shall go forward together in this matter to victory, my friend. That is the thought to carry with you. Heaven will not suffer us to fail, let the risks and difficulties be what they may. We are close comrades now; and I feel that you have been sent just at the moment when such a man was absolutely necessary. And when we have gained the victory, you will play a large part in the far greater work that lies ahead. I have unbounded faith in you.”

“I do not need the spur of ambition to serve you, Princess; but, by the help of heaven, your faith in me shall never prove unfounded.” I spoke with intense earnestness, and then rose to leave. She rose, too, and gave me her hand, which I again carried to my lips; and it pleased me to think that her fingers trembled as my lips touched them.

I had reached the door when she said suddenly:

“Oh, there is one thing which I have not mentioned. We have a kind of watchword which you should know. Our friends are banded together ‘In the Name of a Woman,’ Count.”

I started with a touch of alarm.

“But General Kolfort knows of that. It was with that formula I was accosted by the messenger who led me to his house.”

"He chose it," she answered, with a smile of reassurance. "It is intended to mark off those who are for me as distinguished from those solely devoted to Russia, the good men and true for whom he thinks I can best act as his decoy." I understood her. "You will not forget it and all that it means, as I have explained to you to-day."

"I am not likely to forget all that it means to me," I said, and a quick glow on her face made me think she understood me, too, and was not displeased. With a little flush of pleasure I turned again to leave, when the door was opened, and a servant announced the Duke Sergius.

He came in hurriedly, with a look of vexation on his coarse, broad face, which deepened instantly to anger as his eyes fell upon me.

"They told me you were engaged, Princess, as I see," he said, with a sneer at me; "but I had a matter of urgency to discuss with you, so I bade your servants announce me."

"Your urgency will cost my servants their places," she answered, the expression of her face hardening into cold austerity—so different from anything I had seen during our interview.

"I did not think it could be anything very important," he answered, paying no heed to her words. "Who is this gentleman?" and he turned and glowered at me.

Not only a bully, but a cad, was my thought, as I returned his look with generous interest.

The Princess murmured our names formally and coldly.

"I have heard something of you, Count, from General Kolfort." He spoke as if it had been nothing to

my good. "If I mistake not, I saw you at the ball last night."

"I was there," I answered curtly.

"I want a word or two with you, sometime, and will wait upon you." Had I been a servant at whom he was flinging an order, he could not have put more offensive patronage into his tone.

"If you will write your business I will see if I have time to give you an appointment," I answered with intentional brusqueness. He was not accustomed to be addressed in such a tone, and he started and flushed with anger. I took no notice, but with a bow to the Princess I murmured, "I have the honour to wish you good day, Madame," and, ignoring the Duke entirely, I went away, leaving him staring angrily after me.

"I hate the brute," I said to myself as I went into the street; and in truth I seemed to find a special cause of offence in the fact that I had had to leave him alone with the Princess. "I wish to Heaven he'd quarrel with me," I muttered; and, indeed, the wish was to have a fulfilment that at the moment I had no cause to anticipate or hope.

CHAPTER X

"IN THE NAME OF A WOMAN"

THE result of my interview with the Princess will be readily understood. It made me more devoted to her than ever. The sweetness of her manner, the charm of her rare beauty, the loftiness of her aims, the faith and confidence she had shown in me, and the many signs of her reliance upon me had enslaved me. In a word, I was in love with her. She was far above me, and there was no hope that I could ever win her for my wife. There were a thousand obstacles in the way. But there was nothing to stop my loving her.

So far I had never met one to touch my heart and kindle the myriad flames of inspiring passion which throbbed and thrilled in me now with such ecstasy at the mere thought of this rare and wonderful pearl among women.

I gave heed to no thought of consequences—never paused to think what the end of such a passion might be, nor where it might lead me. She had changed every habit of my mind. Usually cautious, calculating, and self-reserved, I heeded nothing now but the delicious knowledge that I loved her and could serve her, and help her to gain the high and noble end she had in view. And serve her I vowed I would with every faculty I possessed, and, if the need were, at the cost of every drop of blood in my body. I flung every other consideration to the winds and dizzied my

brain with dreams of the delight it would yield me to feel that I could be the means of helping her.

That she depended upon me and trusted me was in itself a delirium of pleasure, and, come what might, I would never fail nor falter in her service. Others might have their aims and objects in this wild business of the intrigue, I would serve Christina, and Christina only, "In the Name of a Woman." Whatever it should be to others, to me it had a real and inspiring meaning, and for me it was destined to be no mere watchword or formula, but the guiding principle of every act and thought and the lode star to determine my life.

But I would guard my secret jealously; it should be mine and mine only. The fire must burn, but it should be down in the centre of my heart; and on the surface no prying eyes should pierce the mask of reserve with which I would conceal my passion.

All this came to me clearly in the frank self-communing of the night, and with it a full admission of the real cause for my hatred of the Duke Sergius. It was not so much the man himself I detested—detestable though I believed him—but the future husband of Christina, using and defiling that fair shrine for the sordid purpose of his selfish policy. He and those in league with him would use the rarest and fairest of God's women as a tool for their own base ends. The mere thought of it was an abomination of desecration.

But they would have to reckon with me, and in my new love-madness I piled up oath upon oath that I would spoil their plans and thwart their designs against her.

"I have unbounded faith in you." The words rang

in my ears like the strain from some angel's song, and filled me with such enthusiasm that I longed for the moment of action, and could scarce find patience to wait through the lingering hours of darkness that I might begin my work; and I lay, my brain simmering with plots and plans against the two men, Sergius and Kolfort, who were thus leagued against Christina.

By the morning, however, I was cooler, and in a fitter frame of mind to face the thousand difficulties of the position.

Spernow was with me early, and I had my first lesson in the necessity of keeping my feelings out of sight. He had heard of my interview with the Princess, and came eager to learn the result. I knew very well by this time that that very shrewd little Mademoiselle Broumoff was at the bottom of his eagerness, and I was on my guard.

I told him that the Princess had convinced me of the soundness of her policy, and that I should do all in my power to help her.

"Is she not all I said of her?" he asked.

"She is a woman with a mission," I answered somewhat coldly. "But her mission is a high and bright one in the interests of Bulgaria and freedom, and, as those are interests in which I feel a deep concern, I shall give her all the help in my power."

The studied deliberateness of my tone perplexed him, for he looked at me in some surprise and disappointment.

"Is that all you thought of her, my dear Count? You must have a cool head—for you have filled her with enthusiasm."

This was sweet music to me indeed; but I replied indifferently:

"I base my opinions on my judgment;" and I smiled as if in deprecation of enthusiasm. "But now I have much to do to-day. I take possession of my house, and I wish to have a consultation with you and Captain Zoiloff as to certain plans. Will you bring him to me there at noon? We have to discuss the future form of our new association."

As soon as he had left me I hurried to meet the officers of my regiment, and my reception by them was exceedingly cordial and friendly—partly due, as I afterwards learnt, to my duel with Ristich, who had been a much hated man; and also because of my reputation as a man of wealth. I gave one prompt proof of this by asking the whole of my brother officers to dine with me at an early date.

By noon I was back at my house to meet Zoiloff and Spernow, and after we had had some practice with the foils and in pistol shooting we set to work upon the serious business of the conference.

We arranged that I should be the head of the organisation, with Zoiloff next in charge under me; and he threw himself with keen ardour into the work.

"I cannot tell you how glad I am to have you with us in this, Count," he said, when we had debated and settled details. "Now that you have come, you seem to be just the man we were waiting for; and this place of yours will be a magnificent rendezvous."

"Shall we have many join us?"

"We do not want too many, but all will be carefully picked, and every man will be one wielding influence over others."

"How will General Kolfort view the scheme?"

"All he will know will be that here is in training a band of young men all working for the object which

he desires, and all capable of giving the greatest help to the movement. The real secret will be in as few hands as possible. When he knows more it will be too late for him to interfere," he said with a smile.

"That will be the hour of danger," I returned.

"Rather the hour of triumph. Think what it must mean in a country like ours to have, say, five hundred young men in this city, each influencing many more, drawn from all classes, high and low, all joined by the strongest ties for one common object, and all looking upon one man as their leader—"In the Name of a Woman." You will wield a tremendous power, Count. God grant you use it wisely," he said, earnestly. "But I have no doubt of that. I should not be here if I had."

"I shall wield it only for the one object."

"It will turn the scale in any crisis," said Spernow.

"It will free the country," said Zoiloff.

I said nothing, but was thinking of the help it would render to my Princess.

One thing troubled me. The General had declared that he would not permit me to remain in the country unless I pledged myself to join him; and give that pledge I would not. Neither would I leave the country. And when my two companions had left, I sat pondering a way out of the difficulty. There was but one way that I could see—to have him satisfied by some indirect means that I had espoused the cause of the Princess, and leave him to draw the inference for himself that in serving her I intended to serve him and his party also.

In this connection I thought of Spernow. He was the General's agent specially told off to sound me, and it would be quite possible for him to give a report suf-

ficiently plausible to effect what was wanted. But who should coach Spernow? The answer came with the question. Without doubt it must be Mademoiselle Broumoff, and it remained only for me to get an interview with her and tell her what to do.

Inwardly I tried to persuade myself that this might be a sufficient reason for me to seek another interview with the Princess; but I put the temptation away from me, strong as it was, reflecting that any too great eagerness on my part to see her would only defeat the very end I had in view—to be of real help. I must raise no suspicions anywhere by seeking to see her too often.

I was thinking this matter out when a servant brought me the card of the Duke Sergius. I started as I saw it, and for a moment was inclined to send an excuse. But reflecting that I must now take my share in helping to blind his eyes, I went to him.

"I have not adopted the somewhat roundabout way you suggested yesterday for having an interview with you, Count Benderoff, but have come direct to you. I am accustomed to go straight to a point."

"Yes?" My tone was curt.

"You and I must understand one another a little better. I have heard of you from General Kolfort, who seems inclined to take you rather seriously; and I may say at once that since I saw you yesterday I have changed my opinion about you. The Princess Christina spoke to me pretty frankly concerning you."

"Yes?" I said again; I hated to hear him even speak her name so glibly.

"I looked on you before as a sort of superior spy—sent here, probably from England, to see what was going on. But I now understand that we are to be

friends to work together. I am glad to hear it." He spoke with a sort of blustering bluntness that he may have intended for an engaging frankness.

"I do not know that I am much concerned what opinion you take the trouble to form about me," I answered, coldly.

"Hang it all, man, can't you see I have come in a friendly spirit to talk over together the things we have in common? Why do you receive me like this?" He spoke sharply, and, I thought, angrily; and when I did not answer immediately, he added with a laugh that had no mirth in it: "You don't suppose I am in the habit of hawking round my friendship?"

"Have I suggested anything of the kind?"

"You make it very difficult for me to enter into things with you."

"I have seen you twice, sir," I answered deliberately. "The first time at the ball the other evening, when you were good enough to scowl at me, and yesterday at the Princess Christina's house, when your words were a kind of scowl expressed audibly. We Englishmen are not accustomed to read such actions as the preliminaries of a friendship."

He started at the word Englishmen, and his eyes lighted with swift anger. Obviously he hated everything English; nor did I wish him to make an exception in my case. I think he read as much in my eyes.

"You Englishmen take very queer views of many things," he answered, after a short pause. "But I thought you were more a Roumanian, and thus a friend of my country?"

"I have the honour to be a Roumanian Count," I said, tersely.

"Do you wish to quarrel with me, Count Benderoff?"

But before I could reply, he added: "But there, that must be ridiculous, for the Princess tells me I may look upon you as a man devoted to her cause, and, therefore, to mine. I shall not be unmindful of those who help us, I would have you understand that—though I wish you did not make it so difficult for me to tell it you."

"I am not working for any hope of material reward at your hands," I answered equivocally. His patronising tone galled me.

"No matter. That will not prevent your accepting it when the time comes. Few men do that, I find—even Englishmen. But now I wish us to be friends and comrades, Count. Do you see any reason against it?"

"We have not begun auspiciously," said I drily.

"Hang it!" he cried with an oath. "You are as diffident as a girl in her teens. I don't find men inclined to quarrel with my offers of friendship, I can tell you. I am not without power and influence, I can assure you;" and he smiled boastfully.

I made no response to his offer. I could not.

"You have made a good choice of a house, Count," he said, after another pause. "I congratulate you. And where is the room where you are going to lure the coy pigeons to be trained in the service of the Princess Christina?" Evidently she had told him of the project.

"I will show it you, if you like," I said, rising.

"Nothing will please me better," he said, following me from the room. "Egad, a splendid hall!" he exclaimed in genuine admiration as we entered it. "Men tell me, too, that you know how to use the sword well. From all accounts you easily spitted that fool Ristich the first time at old Kolfort's, and did just what you liked with him when you met him on the ground."

"He was wounded, and in my opinion unfit to fight. I protested against his doing so, as you may have heard ; but he insisted, and left me no option."

He examined all the arrangements and gymnastic apparatus with obvious interest, making many comments to show his appreciation of everything.

"This is a novel thing for Sofia," he said, after a while. "And a devilish shrewd device to draw in the young bloods of the place. They will make a hero of you, Count. A splendid thought, and one that shows what an acquisition you will be to us. A pistol range, too ; magnificent ! May I try a shot or two ?" He spoke with assumed indifference, but I caught a glance which told me he wished to surprise me with a display of his skill in shooting.

"By all means," I answered readily, not at all unwilling to see what he could do, and to show him also that I knew how to handle a pistol pretty well.

He was a good shot, and took a pride in his work, laughing boastfully when he sent his bullet three times in succession into the bull's-eye of the small target.

"I'm strange to the pistol, of course ; but that's not bad for a first attempt, eh ? I'm a bit out of practice, too, for I haven't a place like this to keep my hand in." There was a sneer at me in this.

"Come to the further mark," I said, putting him half a dozen paces to the rear. "You shoot well."

He tried from the further mark and hit the target each time, but only once got on to the bull's-eye.

"It's a long distance, and the light's rather bad. Do you shoot much ?"

"Well, a little. I have only had two or three shots here ;" and I picked up a revolver carelessly. "I am sorry you found the light bad." I turned, then levelled

the pistol and fired half a dozen shots in rapid succession.

"You have missed," he cried, laughing gleefully.

"I think not. You will find the six bullets in a ring round the bull's-eye. I never miss." I spoke with intentionally boastful swagger.

He went up to the target and examined it, and then turned to me:

"By the Lord, you're a wonderful shot. Where did you learn that trick?"

The unfeigned surprise and admiration in his tone pleased me. He would know now, at least, that I was not a man to be trifled with; from that moment his manner towards me changed, and his bluster and swagger decreased.

"I am very fond of pistol practice," I answered quietly.

He went up to the target again and stood before it, scrutinising the marks of the bullets as though I had performed a miracle.

"I never saw anything like it. It's wonderful," I heard him mutter to himself. Then in a louder tone to me: "I should like to come here for practice, Count." But I had no mind for that.

"It would not do, I am afraid. If we are to make this business a success, I must be as slightly associated with you as possible."

"Yes, that is true—and shrewd enough. You won't want recruits if you can teach them to do that," pointing to the target. "And are you equally clever with the foils?" I could have found it in me to laugh at the change in his manner. He was like a man who had come to bully and had unexpectedly been whipped.

"No, a long way from it. Would you like to try?"

But he declined on the plea that he had no time. His refusal surprised me, for I had heard that he was a splendid fencer, and was somewhat curious to see how far he was my superior. I concluded that he was unwilling to show me how really skilful he was, and had to content myself with the evident impression my skill with the revolver had produced.

He left me soon afterwards, expressing another hope that we should be friends; but I was as guarded in my reply as I had been before, and certainly no more cordial.

I was glad of the visit, however. He had solved the difficulty which had been perplexing me. It was evident that the Princess had said enough to lead him to think that I was working on his side, and I was convinced that he would say as much to General Kolfort, and thus unwittingly render me a service.

That our dislike was mutual I had no doubt. He had come resolved to patronise and, perhaps, to ride rough shod over me in his swaggering, overbearing way; and his performance with the pistol had been intended to intimidate me, by proving that he was as dangerous to quarrel with as he was powerful as an ally. But my display had changed all that; and in a degree had humiliated him in my eyes at the very moment when he was keen to appear most formidable.

He was a man to take such a rebuff badly; and for the future I felt he would be no friend of mine. Whether he would dare to be an enemy depended upon his skill as a swordsman; and that he had carefully kept hidden from me.

Nevertheless, he had cleared one tangle from the skein of my difficulties, and I was therefore glad of the visit. Whether he would seek to show his enmity openly I did not trouble to ask myself.

CHAPTER XI

BETRAYED

THE next few days were crowded ones for me. The organisation of our conspirators went forward with astonishing success—the fruit, of course, of the previous efforts of Zoiloff and those working with him; and when we held our first big meeting to inaugurate our new “Club,” we had nearly three hundred splendid young fellows zealous to pledge themselves to the finger-tips in the cause of the Princess Christina.

Each of them had been presented privately to me, and each promised unreservedly to follow my leadership. All were animated by the most patriotic enthusiasm, and many of them were in a position to influence considerable numbers of their compatriots.

The scheme of the Gymnasium Club evoked great praise, and I was surprised by the ardour with which they threw themselves into the task of athletic training. All the details of this were managed by Zoiloff and a few carefully chosen men under him; and after the first meeting these leaders supped with me, and many were the exuberant anticipations of success that found expression. Zoiloff himself threw aside his customary reserve, and led on the rest to praise me.

“It is the finest movement ever started in Bulgaria, Count,” he said to me when Spernow and he and I were alone. “And it will spread like a heath on fire, from here to every town and centre in the country.

In a month we shall have such power and influence as never before was wielded by anyone here ;” and Spernow was equally enthusiastic.

“I am astonished, I think, by what I have seen to-night,” I said.

“Ah, you don’t know my countrymen,” exclaimed Zoiloff, whose eyes shone and sparkled with the fire of feeling. “They have been crushed under the curse of the Crescent ; they have groaned under the oppression till the fire of patriotism has flickered low indeed, for there seemed no gleam of hope ; they have suffered, God alone knows how bitterly and drearily, till the iron was like to enter their souls and corrode every generous instinct and fervour ; but, thanks be to God, those instincts are not dead, and we shall rouse them into an activity that will startle Europe and save the Balkan States. We have done much in the past few years, as you know ; but that is nothing to what we shall yet achieve. Were the Prince other than he is, the hand of Russia weighing less heavily on him, and their dastardly work of suborning and sapping the truth and honour of the prominent men of the country less deadly, we should not now be cowering and cringing under the talons of the Eagles. Think what it has been to work always under leaders whom we doubted and distrusted for traitors. But that is changed at last. We will have no more of the old leaders. It is the age of young men ; and, by the God that made us all, we’ll never stay nor falter now till the glorious end is reached.”

“Good !” said Spernow, in a rousing tone of concentrated earnestness. “Good, and true, every word of it.”

“No looking back, that is the spirit I honour !” I

exclaimed, infected by their enthusiasm, and thinking of the Princess.

"A toast!" cried Zoiloff, jumping to his feet, his eyes flashing, and his rough, rugged features aglow, as he raised his glass on high. "May the hand that holds this glass blight and rot if it ever falters or turns from the righteous cause—In the name of a Woman."

"Amen to that," said I earnestly, as Spernow and I repeated his words, and finished solemnly together—"In the name of a Woman."

"I have never dared before to be enthusiastic, but you have inspired me, Count. We have a leader in you who will carry us far, and whom all will come to trust as I do;" and Zoiloff gave me his hand, holding mine in a grip that trembled under his excitement.

There was, however, a source of danger that these two knew nothing of, and I could not tell them—the fear of the Countess Bokara's violence.

For the few days I had succeeded in evading her I calculated that she would attempt nothing by herself, but would endeavour first to use me for the work. She had said as much when I had seen her in the presence of the Prince; and it was, of course, obvious that if she could secure my aid her task would be vastly easier. I had the *entrée* to the Princess Christina's house, as she knew, and could thus, were I so minded, render her just the kind of assistance she needed. But I knew she would act soon.

My anxiety on the score of General Kolfort's intention to get me out of his way had been removed as the result of the visit of Duke Sergius coupled with what the General had heard from Spernow, and probably from the Princess herself. He did not send for me and I did not seek him, but on the morning fol-

lowing the meeting at my house he put himself in my way as I was returning from my military duties.

We were both on horseback, and I was passing him with a salute, when he reined up his horse and stopped me.

"You have not come to me, Count," he said curtly.

"And do not propose to come, General," I answered in a similar tone.

"I was not wrong in my estimate of you, I find."

"I do not recall it for the moment," said I indifferently.

He looked at me and smiled grimly.

"Good. A little open antagonism to me is your shrewdest course. I understand you. You are what I thought—a very clever young man. And you can assure everyone that you are not pledged to me—openly. I understand you, I say."

"As a well-known judge of men your opinion is flattering, General," I answered ambiguously.

His smile broadened.

"Very non-committal, as usual. And yet——" And here his smile vanished, and his eyes took an expression of deep penetration. "Be careful that your cleverness and ambition don't carry you too far. If that time should come and I have to act, remember that I warned you. I know what you are doing, and am watching you carefully." Then in a lighter tone he added: "I am glad to hear such good accounts of your military work, and glad, too, that I have not to compel you to leave a country that has such sore need of the valuable services which a man like you can render it."

And with a salute he passed on, leaving me to digest the irony and hidden meaning of his last words. I rode on thoughtfully to my house. The impression

he left on my mind was perhaps just such as he had designed—that the attempt to trick him was indeed like playing with fire on the top of a powder magazine. And I was profoundly uneasy as I thought of what that might mean to the woman whose safety and success were now infinitely more to me than my own.

At my house a surprise was in store for me. A carriage was at the door, and the servants told me that a lady was awaiting me.

I went to the room at once and found the Countess Bokara. She rose with a smile as she held out her hand.

"You look magnificent in your regimentals, Count. And I suppose you have been too busy with your new duties and new friends to think it worth while to see me. And you don't seem over-pleased that I am here now," she added, for my face clouded at the sight of her. She was a bird of ill-omen, as I knew.

"What is your object in honouring me with this informal visit?"

"Informal! Where is the need of formality between you and me?" she asked quickly.

"In Sofia the tongues of gossip run glibly."

"You have soon developed into an authority on the manners of the people here. Spare me your cant, I beg of you. What do you suppose I should care if all the old gossips in the city talked me over till their tongues ached? You ask why I am here. I wish to see you, that is all."

"I am at your service," I answered, with a bow.

"Are you? That's just what I wish to know," she replied, putting a significant meaning to my conventional phrase. "You have not given much evidence of it as yet. I should rather think you have even forgotten your promise to serve me."

"I am, at any rate, ready to listen to you."

She looked at me piercingly during a rather long pause.

"If I thought——" she began, but checked herself abruptly.

"Your thoughts are always shrewd," I returned.

At the reply she looked up and laughed, with such an expression of malignity that it made her face hateful, for all the beauty of her eyes.

"You little know how shrewd this time, Count Benderoff, or you would drop that insipid conventionality, I promise you."

"You are pleased to speak in riddles."

"Yes, because you act them," she retorted, almost fiercely. "But I promise to be plain enough before I leave you. I will drop the one if you will drop the other—but, there, you'll have to, as you'll soon see."

"I do not pretend to understand you," said I.

"Well, then, I'll try to make you. You are not generally dull. Tell me plainly, if you can, on what side are you in all these matters? The question is merely to give you a chance of being frank with me, for I know much."

"I seek the same object as yourself—the freedom of Bulgaria."

"Aye. In the name of a Woman, you mean? You think I do not know your canting phrase."

I was on my guard now, and did not let her see my surprise at her words.

"I have the honour to bear a commission in the Prince's own regiment, as you know," I answered evasively.

"The commission I got for you. Of course I know. But what do you mean by that empty answer? Are

you for or against me? For Heaven's sake try to speak frankly! Nothing else will serve either you or me in this." And she stamped her foot with a gesture of impatience.

"So far as our aims are in common, I am with you."

"Do you think an answer like that will satisfy me? I am beginning to understand you; and if my reading is right, you and those with you may well take heed for yourselves."

"If you have come to threaten me——" I began, when she broke in:

"I have not come to threaten. I have come to have a clear understanding; that is all. And I will have it," she said, impetuously. "I will give you another chance. What did the Prince say to you when you were with him?"

"I do not know there was anything——"

"For the love of Heaven, man, drop this conventional cant and speak as plainly as you can if you wish. What did he say to you about this mad intention of his to abdicate?"

"Intention to abdicate?" I echoed, as if taken by surprise.

"Which means that he did tell you, and you would now pretend that he did not." And, yielding to a sudden storm of passion, she broke out into a torrent of indignant reproaches of what she termed my breach of trust in not telling her.

I did not interrupt her, and gathered that she had only just heard from the Prince what he had said to me. I understood now the cause of her visit and the reason of her passion.

"As his Highness told me in confidence, I could not betray it," I said as soon as I could get a word in.

"He no doubt told you that he laid a charge of secrecy upon me."

"And you did nothing to dissuade him, nothing to stop him from a madly suicidal step. You, who pretend to pose as a disinterested friend of Bulgaria devoted to him and to me! And do you think, knowing me as you do, for all your flippant lip-service to the jargon of conventionality, that I will let this thing be? Do you think that I am so powerless a fool that I cannot stop it? Oh, I am a mad woman when I think of it!" she cried desperately. "It can be stopped and must be—do you hear? must; and you must help me."

"I cannot see how I can help you."

She had risen from her chair and was pacing the room in her anger and now came close to me, and in a tone of concentrated energy and fierceness said:

"The death of that woman Christina will stop it; and in that you can help, aye, and you shall help me." Her face was ablaze with rage and hate as she uttered the Princess's name.

"The Prince himself is opposed to any more bloodshed," I said bluntly. "The sentiment does him infinite honour, and I share it."

"You dare to say that to me? To set me at defiance? To go back upon the pledge you gave? Are you a coward, Count Benderoff?"

"I will be no party to the assassination of the Princess," I answered sternly.

"You defy me?" And, laying her hand on my arm, she stared into my eyes for some moments in silence, and then, her lips curling and her face so hard and set that the nostrils dilated with the vehemence of her anger, she added: "I could kill you."

Clearly it was to be open war between us, and I pre-

pared for it. I drew my arm away and answered coldly:

"I think, Madam, this interview has lasted long enough."

She started as if I had insulted her, and I looked for another passionate outbreak. But it did not come. Instead of that her expression underwent a complete change and she laughed.

"Poor fool!" she cried in a bantering tone. "Do you know where I shall go straight from here if you turn me away? Wait a moment and I will tell you." She paused, paying no heed to my gesture of anger. "In the name of a Woman, eh? This excellent house, this sumptuous display of wealth, this clever, shrewd Englishman, with his hatred of plots, this attractive idea of a gymnasium club—what does it all mean?" And she leered at me with a look infinitely cunning.

I kept my face quite impassive as I met her eyes.

"Would you like to tell me the inner secret, or shall I tell you? I know—I know everything." She paused again, but I gave no sign; and then the rage began to return to her face, and her tone grew vehement again. "It is a lie—and a lie against the man whose eyes I can open with a word. You are working and plotting for the Princess, In the name of a Woman, are you not? And these Russian fools and dolts think you are working for them at the same time. But I know your real intent. To fool them up to the moment when you can throw off the disguise—to put this precious Princess on the throne, and then to snap your fingers in the face of the old dotard, Kolfort, and obey only the Princess. This marriage, on which he counts so much, is never to take place; but

when you have rallied and organised these members of your club, as you call it, you reckon you will be strong enough to throw over the Russians and declare for what you call Bulgarian independence. Independence, forsooth, with such a woman as Christina on the throne."

I knew now the extent of the sudden peril, but I thrust the fear that filled my soul for Christina's sake out of sight and laughed.

"You have a lively imagination, Madam!"

"Yes; turn it aside with a scoff or a sneer if you think you can. But do you believe General Kolfort will think it nothing more than the subject of a sneer when he learns it?" She was disappointed that I showed no sign of fear.

"You can take your own course, and if you think to help yourself or the Prince by filling the air with your fables, do so."

"You are a coward, Count Benderoff," she cried hotly, "to play thus on my helplessness. I know that I cannot help my Prince or strengthen his position by telling what I know, and what you dare not deny, to be true. But if I cannot help my cause, I can at least revenge myself, and I will. A word from me and where will be all your plots and plotters? Your club will exercise then in the yards of the gaols and behind the walls of Tirnova fortress. I tell you, you dare not play me false."

I knew the grip she had on me now could tighten in a moment into strangulation, with the ruin of every man and woman among us; but I maintained my impassive, stern expression.

"If you choose to spread these tales, I cannot stay you," I answered.

"Will you help me to my revenge upon the woman Christina?"

"What do you mean by revenge?"

"Death," she cried fiercely.

"I would slay you with my own hand first," I answered, the passion in me rushing to utterance.

She laughed again vindictively and hatefully.

"So it is true, then, she has bewitched you. I might have known it. I told you and warned you that she was a vampire using up men's lives with the un pitying remorselessness of a wild beast. And you are her latest lover, I suppose!"

The slander suggested by her words maddened me.

"I can hear no more, Madam," I said sternly.

She threw up her head with a gesture of pride.

"Do you order me to leave your house—knowing the consequences?"

I was in sore perplexity. She was a devil and she looked it as she stared at me, her lovely eyes glowing with rage and hate and menace.

"If you have more to say it must be at another time, when you are in a different mood," I returned.

She seemed about to burst forth again in her wild, vehement way, but as suddenly changed her mood and said:

"I understand. You wish to find a bridge over as dangerous a chasm as a man ever yet had to cross. I will see you again; but next time it will be to hear from you that you accept my terms. You are not a man to walk open-eyed to sheer ruin. I will go."

And as she left me, sweeping out of the room, with a challenging, defiant, triumphant smile, I could almost have found it in me to kill her.

CHAPTER XII

THE SPY

AS soon as the door closed behind the Countess Bokara, I threw myself into a chair in a condition of unspeakable dismay, rage, and chagrin at this most unexpected turn.

It spelt ruin to everything and everybody concerned in our scheme. I had seen and heard quite enough of General Kolfort to know full well that the merest hint of such a plot as ours would drive him instantly to desperate extremes. He would put in force every engine of the powerful machinery at his instant disposal to crush and punish us. And that he could crush us as easily as he would pinch a fly between his fingers there was not a doubt. His power was practically absolute, and he would use it mercilessly, like the man of iron that he was.

Nor was that the worst. There was a traitor somewhere in our midst; a recreant who had carried the secret in hot haste to this vengeful woman. I could not hazard even a guess as to whose was the treachery, but that it threatened the future of the scheme, should even she herself be silenced, was as patent as the fingers on one's hand.

Yet what to do I could not see, plague and rack my wits as I would, as I sat alternating between moods of consternation, rage, and searching reflection.

In the afternoon I had a horse saddled and rode out

of the town for a gallop in the country, in the hope that some solution of the problem would suggest itself ; and the ride cooled and sobered me.

Two things were imperative. We must find the leakage and blind the traitor as to our real intentions. Our future safety rested on that being done without delay ; and for this purpose I must see Zoiloff and consult with him. As soon as we discovered the Judas among us we could take measures to deal with him. If possible, that should be done by cunning ; but, failing that, a verse as I was to bloodshed and violence, force must be used. But an idea occurred to me by which he could be effectively hoodwinked, and I stored it by for use should the occasion come.

As to the Countess Bokara, there were two courses. One was for me to appear to play into her hands and so gain time for our own plans to ripen—a line of action vastly repulsive to me, with all its necessary paraphernalia of deceit and lies ; the other, to kidnap her and put her into safe keeping until the crisis should be passed. I knew that I could lure her to my house, and that then the necessary measures could be taken ; but the cowardice of the plan made me entertain it only with disgust.

In the case of a man I would not have hesitated for a moment ; indeed I would never have let him leave the house that day. But with a woman I could scarcely bear the thought of it, although this woman was vastly more dangerous than many men.

I sought keenly for some other scheme, and for a moment entertained the idea of going to the Prince himself, telling him all frankly, and begging his aid to deal with her. But I abandoned it. I remembered he had said he would stand by the throne if he could make

sure of efficient help, and I calculated that his vacillation would cause him to turn now and claim the help of our party in his defence. A worse than useless effort, as I knew, owing to the impossibility of rallying to his cause the men who had been turned from him by his weakness. Not only could we do no good for him, but we should imperil the great patriotic rising for no purpose.

I was therefore driven back upon the distasteful course of duping the woman who had thus threatened us.

"Would to heaven she were a man!" And each time the thought broke from me in involuntary utterance, I pictured how easy it would then be to act.

As I was riding back, moody and thoughtful, I met the carriage of the Princess. She caught sight of me when I was still at a distance, and her lovely face was wreathed with a radiant smile as she checked her horses and greeted me. Mademoiselle Broumoff was by her side, and her keen, sharp eyes were quick to read trouble in my face.

"You look very thoughtful, Count," said the Princess, "as if heavy military affairs were weighing upon you."

"I have been thinking out the answer to a very ingenious problem set me this morning," I said, trying to speak lightly.

"It has been a trying problem for your horse, I should think," she said, glancing at his flanks, which were covered with foam, for I had ridden hard.

"Not more so than for his rider, I assure you."

"I hope it has not distressed you as much."

"The Count carries the sign of that in his face," said the little Broumoff, earnestly. "I hope it is no more than a military problem."

"All problems in Bulgaria have their military side," I answered gravely.

The Princess's eyes showed concern. She understood.

"We must not let your horse stand while he is so heated with his problem, Count. If you would like to see me, I shall be at home in an hour from now."

"With your permission, I will call," I said, and saluted her as she drove on. "I will have the searchlight of her woman's wit on the matter," was my thought as I rode home; and, despite the grave and critical reason for the interview, I was yet half disposed to be glad of it, so much store did I set on the opportunity of being in her presence. I could scarcely wait with patience for the minutes to run out until I could start for her house.

Mademoiselle Broumoff was still with her when I arrived.

"You have news of some kind for me, Count?" said the Princess.

"Unfortunately, I bring you bad news, Madame."

"It could not come by a more unwilling messenger, I am sure."

"On my honour, that is true," I said earnestly, touched by her gentle thought.

"And half its sting will be blunted since I hear it from you. What is it? Tell me frankly."

"Its sting cannot but be sharp enough to wound. I fear we have a traitor somewhere high up in our ranks;" and with that I told her what had passed in my interview with the Countess Bokara.

"It is ugly news indeed," she said at the close, profoundly moved. "And as dangerous as it is ugly. What think you of it, Nathalie?"

Mademoiselle Broumoff had turned pale with sudden consternation.

"I cannot think. It is too dreadful. What does the Count propose?"

The Princess turned eagerly to me for my counsel.

"We must either blind the Countess Bokara or get her away to a place of safety until we have had some time to act. But the leakage must be traced."

"Who can it be, Nathalie?" cried the Princess, in a tone of dismay. "Have you tried to cure this mad woman of her prejudice against me, Count?"

"I have had as yet no opportunity. Since my first meeting with her, I have seen her only once for a few minutes in the presence of the Prince until this morning, when she came to confound me with this news, and to urge me to join her in assassinating you."

"She chose her companion curiously," said the Princess, with a smile of confidence that went straight to my heart. "I hope my safety may never be in less trusty hands than yours."

I did not trust myself to answer with more than a look, and as I turned my eyes away I caught the little Broumoff eying us keenly. Then the Princess startled us both.

"I have made up my mind; I will see her," she said.

"Christina, it is impossible!" cried Mademoiselle Broumoff quickly. "She would murder you with her own hand."

"The Count will guard against that at least, and he will arrange the interview. Will you not?"

"I would do much to serve you, but this would be a hazardous step, and one that can scarcely lead to any good. You can have but the faintest idea of her hatred of you."

"Then I can learn it for myself. I will see her;" and her tone was decision itself. I continued my attempt to dissuade, but without success, and she would not rest until I had agreed to arrange a meeting at my house. One stipulation I insisted upon—that I should be present.

"I should wish that," she assented. "I do not mean to run any risks, and I should feel safe only if you were there, Count." The words were sweet enough to my ears, but they did not allay my alarm on the score of the interview. I yielded all against my judgment, and arranged to try to get the Countess Bokara to my house on the following afternoon.

When that was settled I lingered on, inventing pretext upon pretext for my stay that I might steep my senses in the charm of her presence, the light of her eyes, and the music of her voice. Nor did she seem unwilling for me to stay, as I noticed with rare delight.

But under all the pleasure of this fascinating dalliance a current of earnest thought was running in my head, and when I left her I had already formed a plan, for which I proceeded at once to make preparations.

I had no hope that the Princess would reap any benefit from the coming interview, for I could not see a possibility of any good resulting. But I resolved that if she failed I would have my own plan in readiness. If the Countess Bokara came to the house, she should not leave it again except to pass into some place of security until our plans were complete.

I sent at once in quest of Zoiloff, therefore, and, having explained everything that had happened, outlined my scheme.

"You are sure that she really knew, and was not

merely making a shrewd guess?" he asked. "I cannot think of any man among us who would turn blabber. But if I find him——" He left the sentence unfinished, but the threat was the more expressive.

"Yes, yes, there are twenty ways of dealing with a man," said I; "but a woman is different."

"A traitor is a traitor, never mind the sex; and I see no cause for mercy for one more than another," he growled into his beard, his look very set and stern. "But what is your plan?"

"That we prepare a couple of rooms here in my house, and keep her until we can find some other place equally safe and secret."

"Is this secret? Are you sure of your servants? May we not look for the leakage among them?"

"Spernow found them for me," was my answer.

"Would you change them?"

"Every man and woman to-morrow, if you can fill their places."

"I can do that," he assented quickly. "Wait—better—can you let me see them all? I may spot the traitor, or at all events separate the sheep from the goats."

I rang the bell and sent for my steward. When he came I told him to get the servants all together, and send them in to me one at a time, as I wished to question them separately about a certain paper which I said had been mislaid.

They came in one by one, and we so arranged the position that each stood in a strong light for Zoiloff to be able to watch them as I put a short string of questions. He put a black mark against three whom he regarded as suspicious. The rest, he declared, were above question.

"My opinion is that one of those three men is false and a spy, presumably in the service of this woman. I expect they have been eavesdropping when you and I and Spernow have been together, and perhaps have caught some unguarded words. The thing is very ugly. What shall we do?"

"Fool them with their own tactics," said I readily, thinking of my original idea. "Let us have a hurried meeting of men whom we can trust, have it to-night, explain the position hurriedly, and pretend that we are disclosing to them the real object of the plot—to work nominally for the Princess, but really for the Russian party—and have these suspects so placed that they can hear what is going on. Then catch them in the very act; and send them packing with this new version of the thing in their minds, after a pretty good fright, and under oath not to reveal the story."

"Yes, it will serve; but it will want adroit management," said Zoiloff.

"You say my steward is a man to be trusted?"

"Absolutely. I know him well."

"Good. Then leave that part to me, while you hurry off and bring in about a dozen of our men. Let their arrival be a little dramatic, to give colour to the drama, so that the spies may think the meeting too important to be missed; and I will answer for the rest."

As soon as he had gone I called my steward and told him plainly that there was a spy in the house, and that we suspected one of the three men I named. Then I outlined the arrangements he was to make—to get as many of the other servants out of the house as he could without creating suspicion, and to give those who remained work to do in other parts of the

house, so that the three should be free to spy upon us; that then he should set them separately some light kind of work close to the room in which I directed the meeting was to be held, of which he was to drop a hint. He was a shrewd fellow, and entered readily into the matter.

"One of them is no traitor, sir," he said, naming him. "I can answer for him with my life. I have known him for many years, and I am sure of him. The others I do not know and do not like."

"Never, mind, test all three; and as the clock strikes eleven be at hand to watch them and await my orders."

He went at once to do as I ordered; and that he did the work shrewdly the sequel showed.

Zoiloff returned very soon with Spernow and another man, and I received them in the room which had been prepared as the stage for our little drama. When the others came, I noticed with a smile that each was cloaked; and in all we made a party of fourteen. We smoked and had wine until I calculated that the spies would be at their posts; and then, speaking in a tone lowered but sufficiently distinct to reach any eaves-dropper, I told them that the hour had come when we thought it necessary to make a most important disclosure of our plans. While working apparently for the Princess, we were, in fact, Russian agents pledged to the Czar, and bent upon putting the Princess upon the throne solely in his Majesty's interests; and I went on to declare that the hour had come to strike the blow, and so on.

A discussion followed, in which objections were raised and answered, while I kept my eye upon the clock until the hand was approaching the hour of

eleven, when I rose and declared that this was the moment when each man must declare himself.

My rising was, in fact, an agreed signal, and Zoiloff, Spernow, and another man stole noiselessly to the spots where I knew any listeners would be sure to post themselves.

As the clock was on the point of striking, the two doors and a window opening to a conservatory beyond were flung open, and one of the spies was caught in the very act of eavesdropping.

"We are betrayed, Count," cried Zoiloff in a voice of thunder, dragging in the man, who, shivering and white with fear, wriggled and struggled to free himself from his stern-faced captor.

A solemn hush fell on the room, while the trembling, panic-stricken wretch was placed in the midst of the men who closed round him. The silence was grim enough to have tried stronger nerves than his.

"What is the meaning of this?" I asked sternly, breaking the silence.

"I was not listening, my lord; indeed——"

"Don't lie to me. What did you hear? Quick, speak the truth, for your life hangs on it."

"I heard nothing, I swear I did not. I was only——"

"Silence!" I thundered, "if you have nothing but lies to tell." He threw himself at my feet and begged for mercy.

"Speak the truth, then," I said.

He glanced all round the ring of stern, hard-set faces and threw up his hands, and then clasped them before his face in despair.

"Gentlemen, you have seen for yourselves; what say you?" I asked.

"There is but one punishment for such an act—death!" cried Zoiloff, in such a ringing, merciless tone that the rascal's heart may well have sunk within him. "Death, if he will not speak."

"Death, if he will not speak," echoed the rest.

At this Zoiloff drew his sword, and at the clash of the steel in the dead silence the wretch moaned.

"Will you speak, or die?" I said, after a moment.

"I heard only a little," said the man after a struggle, his lips so dry and parched that he could only speak with an effort.

"Tell it!" I thundered again; and word by word he told us that he heard me declare that we were Russian agents, and all that followed.

His fear of the death that he believed imminent was sickening to behold, and made me anxious to close the scene.

"You have heard this wretch's confession, gentlemen; what say you?"

"He must die!" cried Zoiloff. "In the name of the Czar I claim his life. Every Russian interest in the country is in peril while he lives."

"You will vote, if you please," I said. And we went through a form of writing each man's decision on paper.

"The verdict is unanimous," I said, glancing at the paper. "You must die. I would have spared your life, but I am powerless against all present."

At that he clung to me, clutching at my hands and at my coat, praying, beseeching, imploring, and vowing that he would never say a word of what he had overheard.

"Whose spy are you?" I asked.

"I am in the service of the Countess Bokara."

"Wait;" and I left the room, wishing to confer with my steward as to the other two suspects. The steward assured me that he had found them just where they had been directed to remain. I went back to the room, and the wretch broke out again with cries and wailings and prayers.

I could bear no more of it, and put an end to the scene at once.

"Gentlemen, I have heard some strange reports with regard to this man. We will, with your leave, postpone his punishment, and I will be answerable for his safe custody."

"Deal with him as you will, Count," said Zoiloff. Calling in the steward, I gave the man into his keeping, and they left the room together.

The meeting broke up soon after; and Zoiloff remained only a minute to exchange congratulations upon the success of the ruse.

"We have the spy, and to-morrow we will deal with his employer;" and his look was as black as a thundercloud as he spoke.

CHAPTER XIII

FACE TO FACE

SOON after Zoiloff had left me I sent for the spy. It was part of the scheme that he should be liberated at once, in order that, if he pleased, he should carry the news that he had heard to his employer.

The interview was short. I told him I had determined to spare his life and set him free if he would take a solemn vow never to reveal what he had heard, and to leave the country at once. There was no mistaking the genuineness of his terror, and he was eager to take any oath I wished to impose. As I dismissed him I said, with all the sternness I could concentrate into my voice and looks :

“Remember that from this hour you are a marked man. Every Russian agent in this country will know you ; your every action will be watched, and every word you speak will be noted. One breath of treachery, one single suggestion of further deceit, and you are a dead man. Your life hangs on the thinnest of threads. And if ever you feel tempted to break your oath, recall this night and the stern faces of the ring of men who voted that you should die. Go !”

He staggered out of the room, reeling like a broken-witted drunkard.

After my regimental work on the following day Zoiloff came to me, looking worn and wearied.

"I have been at work all night," he said; "but I have done good. I have found a place where this woman, Bokara, can be held in absolute safety for ten years if necessary, if once we can get her there."

And he told me that one of our party, named Kroubi, had a large house in the middle of his estate, in a tower of which just such a prison as we sought could be found.

"You are sure of the man?"

"As of myself. And he himself will be her keeper."

"She is a woman of rare fascination."

"Would she fascinate me, think you?" he asked, a smile on his rugged face.

"There are not many men like you, Zoiloff," said I, warmly, for during our intercourse he had won upon me strangely. He was such a staunch, genuine, thorough fellow.

"That is pleasant hearing from you," he answered. "But you need have no fear on Kroubi's account. Every impulse of his strong character which is not devoted to our cause is absorbed by his hatred of women."

"We will trust him, then," I agreed. "And now let us consider how to get her to his place." And when we had threshed this out and made our plans the time for the Countess Bokara's visit was close.

I felt both anxious and excited. The whole future of our plans hung, as I knew, in the balance, while the risks of the interview between her and the Princess seemed to grow as the time approached.

The Princess arrived first, and I went to her immediately.

"Has she come?" was her first question, eagerly asked.

"It is not yet time; but I think she will come. Do you know what happened here last night?"

"I have heard something, but would rather hear it all from you. It was good news, I believe—but it was sure to be, you are so zealous in my cause," she said. "Tell me everything."

I told her and she listened, deeply interested, her eyes watching my face as I spoke. At the close she smiled and said:

"One would think from your telling, Count, that you had been merely a bystander instead of the prime mover in it all."

"Captain Zoiloff did more than I, for it was he who detected the miscreant. The rest was simple enough."

"Then should I keep my feelings and words of thanks for him, and think of you as one who serves me, as it were, by routine."

"We are all devoted to your service, Princess," I said.

"No one more faithful than the others?"

"None less faithful than myself, I hope."

"I like that standard. Pray Heaven that you are right, for then I am a lucky woman indeed;" and her eyes shone with a light that was like to dazzle me.

"You will be on your guard this afternoon with the Countess Bokara," said I, after a pause I found embarrassing.

"I am always on my guard—except, I think, with you," she added, musingly.

"I mean, you will not let her approach too close to you. I know her to be a dangerous woman, capable of any madness."

"You will be there," she said, with an accent of trust in me which I read with delight.

"But still she must not come too near you. Infinite mischief might be wrought in a single unguarded moment."

"You think she may even try to murder me in your presence?"

"I believe her capable of any desperate deed ; that is why I urge you," I cried, very earnestly.

She smiled, let her eyes rest on mine with a look that seemed as tender and warm as a ray of summer morning sunshine, while a faint blush tinged her cheeks.

"I will not cause you a moment's needless anxiety ; you have had too many on my account already," she said gently ; and in the pause that followed a servant entered to say that the Countess Bokara was waiting to see me.

We had arranged that I should see her first alone, and I found her in a mood of jubilant and boastful confidence.

"I knew you would come round to my views, Count, though I confess I did not think the effect of what I said yesterday would be felt quite so quickly. I was disposed to give you at least three or four days, but I like you better for your promptness." She spoke exultingly.

"I am not so confident as yourself that our interview will end to your liking," I answered.

"I am confident, and have even more reason for it than you at present dream. You may prepare yourself for great news."

"I am not good at riddles. What news do you mean?"

"That I do not consider your help so necessary as I once thought."

That there was some new danger beneath her words I was certain, but what it was I could not guess.

"I do not understand you," I said shortly.

"A child could see that. I like the look of per-

plexity and fear on your face ; ” and she laughed in a hard, sneering tone. “ You have been very useful to me, after all, though you do not know it. What you showed me yesterday gave me the clue ; and I have been merciful—in a way, very merciful. Death is ever sweetest to a woman when it comes, or seems to, from the hand of one she loves.”

“ You have a pleasant wit, and your laugh fits it well,” I said drily.

“ A jibe moves you more quickly than a threat, my friend. And this is a jibe in which you have had unwittingly a big share ; ” and her bitter tone was in full harmony with the hard, confident glance which she levelled at me. “ Did you think I could be merciful even to those I hate ? ”

“ Have you come to do no more than discuss your own qualities ? ”

“ I have not come to be your dupe,” she retorted fiercely. “ You have discovered my spy, I find, and I congratulate you on the clever stroke with which you have blinded his eyes. But it is too late, Count.”

“ The man was caught last night in the very act of spying, and narrowly escaped with his life. He confessed you had employed him.”

She waved her hand, as though the matter were nothing.

“ He had served his turn, let him go. I have no longer need of him ; and, of course, you would have killed him had your last night’s meeting been anything but a clever ruse. But you scared his poor wits out of him—not a very brilliant or difficult achievement perhaps—and by now he is off to the frontier as fast as his shaky legs will carry him. But that is nothing. Tell me, Count, what would you do if within an hour you were to hear that your Princess had fallen dead ? ”

"Probably I should seek out her murderess, and kill her," I replied hotly.

"Good; then I was right. You do love her, eh? Then listen. She trusts you, of course, trusts you blindly and implicitly; and if you sent her a little pretty gift, a little gentle act of courtesy from so gallant and faithful a servant, would she prize it, think you?"

"I don't wish to discuss such matters with you," I answered; but in my heart felt glad indeed that the Princess was safe in my house at that very moment.

"You don't wear your heart on your sleeve, you mean. Men of your sort always think they do not. And yet the knowledge of the love of such a man would be precious to many women. That is how you have been useful to me. Now can you read the riddle?"

I thought I could, but made no reply.

"Yesterday, when I was here, you showed me what you could not hide from my eyes, that this woman had drawn you to her, as she has drawn hundreds of others. But this time she has dared to draw you from allegiance to me;" this with a touch of sudden passion, which passed instantly as she continued in a tone of exquisitely modulated softness, suggestive of the purr of a tigress.

"When I left you I saw how I could use the secret I had surprised. By now I have done my work, so I may speak frankly. I shall not want your aid now. Thinking that the Princess might be pleased with a little token from her latest lover—you need not wince, it does not matter now who knows your secret—I sent her in your name a little emblem of your devotion. And what more fitting emblem could there be than a rare and beautiful rose?"

"It was an unwarrantable liberty, Madam," I cried, with a flush of anger. She laughed at my indignation.

"But it was more than an emblem of devotion, for it carried in its soft, sweet petals the essence—of instant death. You know these things are common in this East of ours. One scent of that rose, enjoyed, no doubt, with a murmur of your name, and a thought of your welcome little courtesy—and I and my Prince were rid of her forever." A light of malignant triumph flashed out of her large dangerous eyes as she finished: "I shall not need your dagger now, nor the other weapons of your trade."

"You mean that the Princess is dead?" I asked quietly.

"The news will soon be spread abroad noisily enough; and you may find it sufficiently embarrassing to explain your share in it."

"You have the malice of a devil."

"It was a sweet death for her. Was I not right when I said I was merciful?" she cried, with another hateful laugh. "And now I have come to warn you, that you may fly if you wish while there is yet time." She gloated in triumph over my silence, which she read as that of consternation.

"You are a brave woman," I said at length. "If what you said were true you might have guessed that you would not leave this house alive."

"It is true," she cried daringly.

"Yes, as to intent, perhaps. But the Princess herself is safe, and here in this house waiting to see you."

"It is false," she said fiercely. "I don't believe you;" and she stared at me, the veritable type of disconcerted fury.

"It is true," I replied shortly; adding sternly: "And

true, too, that though you failed in the act, you shall answer for the intent."

She was magnificent in her rage, as she stood at bay, staring open-eyed at me; and for many moments not a word was spoken by either of us.

"Let me see her!" she exclaimed at length.

"Not alone," said I significantly. I rang the bell.

"Tell the Princess Christina we will wait upon her," I said to the servant, and a minute later the two were face to face, while I looked on, all anxiety and apprehension as to the result.

They stood for a moment looking at one another; the Princess calm and dignified, in an attitude of queenly grace, her speaking, lustrous eyes alight with the hope with which she had sought the interview. But the hope was quickly clouded with a dash of anticipative disappointment, caused by the Countess Bokara's vehement passion and hate which envenomed her fiery glances, and spoke in every straining movement of her lithe sinuous body.

"Your Highness surely does me great honour in this reception," said the Countess scornfully, breaking the short silence.

"I am sorry we have not met before," was the mild, temporising reply. "I would have gladly seen you to remove your too evident prejudice against me."

"I have heard that you are accustomed to rely much upon the attractions of your beauty. But I am not a man."

"I am desirous only of disarming by mutual understanding so powerful and, as I have too much reason to know, so bitter an enemy. Tell me, Countess, why are you so bitter against me?" The tone was very gentle, almost solicitous, but I could see that the other's sneer had gone home.

"Why should I tell you what you must know full well?"

"If people speak truly of you we have assuredly the same end in view—the welfare of Bulgaria."

"I am not half a Russian, and the tool of tyrants."

"Am I?" and the Princess's eyes flashed. "Your agent has discovered our real designs and carried them to your ears. You know now our cause is the cause of freedom, and that we are no more the tools of Russia than you can be. Why, then, say this? And why my enemy?"

I was astonished and not a little dismayed by her frankness.

"Your conversion has been rapid. It is but a few nights since your friends, impelled by zeal for you and for your cause, tried to murder me."

"That was not done with my knowledge. God knows I would not spill a drop of blood. What would your death profit me or the end I have in view? Do you think I am so mad as to wish the country to believe I desire to rule by terror, the sword, and the secret dagger?"

"They do believe it!" cried the Countess in a tone of hate; "and they do not wish you to rule at all. Who has called you to take the place of the Prince, to plot against him, and to drive him from the throne? What are you doing but nurturing and fostering the villainous ingratitude of the people, that by this act of double treachery you may mount the throne?"

"You forget, the Prince is himself resolved to abdicate," I interposed.

"And why?" she asked hotly, turning upon me. "Why, but that the plots which the Princess here and those in league with her have organised against his life are driving him away?"

"This is no work of mine, Countess. Before my name was ever mentioned, before the thought of my ever taking the throne was ever suggested, the Prince's position had become untenable."

"Because your allies, these hateful Russians, had made it so in preparation for your coming, or the coming of some other tool."

"But now that you know I am acting not for, but against, them, the cause of your enmity, if this be the cause, is removed."

"Do you wish me to join you, then, to swell the train of your slaves?"

"I wish to disarm your hostility."

"To suborn me from my allegiance to my Prince, you mean?" Her answers were growing in bitterness and vehemence each time she spoke. "Your Highness mistakes me. I am no traitor to my sovereign."

"But the Prince is bent on abdicating."

"Because you and others are driving him to it. You ask why am I your enemy. This is the reason, or one that will serve."

"You have others."

"Yes, I hate you. Is that what you wish me to say? I hate you. Is it as musical for you to hear it as for me to speak it? I hope it is. I hate you, and thank my God that I have a chance of telling you the truth to your face." Her passion, only lightly held in restraint, broke its bounds now, and her eyes flamed, and her lips quivered with the rush of it. "What have you ever done in regard to me that has not earned that hate? Where are the men, good and true to the Prince and myself, that you have lured away from me? What are your actions, one and all, but those of deadly antagonism to me? Am I a craven sheep that I shall see my friends alienated, my Prince threatened, my cause



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destroyed, and my very life attempted, and only bleat a few baa-words of thanks to you for your gracious thoughts of me? God has not inspired my heart with that meekness, and while I have breath to breathe, a voice to speak, and hands to do, I will be your enemy. Is that enough, your Highness?" She spoke with such furious vehemence that at the close she was breathless; and she clenched her hands, and glared with hate at the Princess.

"I have not done the things you say. I could not do them," said the Princess, in a tone whose calmness did not hide from me the ache of disappointment in her heart.

"It is easy to deny. It costs but a breath," was the sneering answer. "But you ask me will I cease to be your enemy?" she added, her eyes flashing dangerously. "I will—on one condition."

"What is that?"

"One that will at least test your sincerity. Give up this enterprise of yours; cease to persecute my Prince, and I will cease to be your enemy." She put the conditions with a leer of malice, and stood waiting for the answer with a curling lip and insolent mien.

"I am not persecuting the Prince, and from my heart I declare that if Bulgaria could be freed by him I would serve him only too gladly."

"I think no good can come of prolonging this interview," I said, for I could not bear to hear the ring of insult in every word which the Countess uttered. But my interposition was ill-timed and unfortunate. Turning partly toward me the Countess said, in a tone of simulated submission, the irony of which was maddening:

"Your Highness's newest and most faithful adviser would spare your ears the blunt utterances of truth

from my rough lips. A renegade is always solicitous to temper the wind for his latest mistress."

I drew a deep breath of rage at the insult and the foul slander insinuated with such devilish adroitness.

"The Count is right, Madam, I must admit my defeat," said the Princess haughtily.

"I must ask you to withdraw, Countess," said I sternly.

She laughed with wanton insolence.

"I am no servant of yours to be bade to do this or ordered to do that. I came to this interview to please you, I shall leave it to please myself;" and she drew herself up to her full height in defiance. Then she laughed again a loud, ringing laugh, forced, of course, but a clever parody of spontaneous merriment. "Upon my word, this is a pretty scene, and I have vastly enjoyed it. I have, alas! no weapon with me save my tongue, or there should have been a different ending, I do assure you. But that I can use. You have shrunk from the truth to-day, as the Count here shrank yesterday, when I discovered the secret of his warm allegiance to you."

"Silence, Madam!" I cried hastily, fearing what her rash tongue would say.

"Is he not earnest, your Highness? Is he not a man to be proud of? To warm a woman's heart? I told you just now of men you had won away from my Prince and me—here stands the latest of those renegades, a man who loves you." She uttered the words with an accent of assumed sincerity. "I congratulate you, Princess, upon your conquest. I cannot hope to regain for my Prince a man who is aflame with a new-born passion for you."

"This is monstrous," I cried, my face flushed with anger and concern. "If you do not leave the room, I

shall summon my servants that they may remove you."

She faced me unflinchingly.

"You dare not," she said.

"Then be silent, and end these ill-timed jibes, and leave the room."

"Jibes? Is that a jibe? And she raised her arm and waved it to where the Princess Christina stood, her face covered with deep ruby blushes. "An unconventional love avowal, at any rate. You are a brave man, Count Benderoff, and I do believe that much rarer thing, a modest one; but at least you should not quarrel with me because I tell the Princess that you love her, and let you see by the surest token that a woman can give that she loves you in return."

At this the Princess sank upon a chair and concealed her face in her hands, between the white fingers of which the deep red glow was showing.

I turned away and would not let her think I had seen it.

"Your cowardice and insolence have drained my patience," I said fiercely to the Countess. "Come," and I went to the door.

She stood a few seconds, as if hesitating whether to defy me longer, and glanced in infinite triumph at the troubled figure of the Princess.

"If the interview has not accomplished your object," she cried, "at least it has not been without interest;" and with a last insolent, exultant laugh, she swept out of the room, followed closely by me, more resolved than ever to cage this angry, dangerous tigress.

CHAPTER XIV

THE COUNTESS'S RUSE

AS we crossed the hall she turned to leave the house by the front door, where Zoiloff was standing.

"I have something still to say to you," I said shortly, as I opened the door of the room where I had seen her before this futile interview.

"You wish to thank me, I suppose, for having been the means of revealing to each of you the other's love," she answered, with another of her flaunting laughs; though she changed quickly and said: "You may spare your thanks. I had a purpose—and you will soon learn the reason. I am a dangerous woman, for all your contempt of me."

"Too dangerous to be at liberty, Countess," I answered curtly. "It is to tell you that I have brought you here."

"What do you mean? That you will dare——" The words died away as she read my purpose in my eyes, and the first symptom of fear I had ever seen in her showed itself, only however to be at once crushed out of sight. One of her bitter sneers followed. "So I have put my foot in a trap, you think, and your lovely Princess is but a paltry decoy. A truly royal part for the august ruler that is to be!"

"Your railing falls on unheeding ears, Countess. I have made my decision."

"You are an ingrate, my lord the Count ; and in your haste to strike at me you are forgetting the wound you do to your Princess."

"Your insulting references will not turn me from my course," I said shortly, my anger against her burning like a fever.

"Then shall I say you honour yourself and the woman you love by imprisoning me for discovering and revealing your love secret ; and that you give proof of your courage by keeping me here that you may stay and gloat over your victim ?" I saw her start as some fresh thought struck her, and she looked sharply at me and appeared to search her memory rapidly. Then she smiled the same exultant smile that I had noticed before, while a dangerous light came back to her eyes.

"I will not attempt to escape."

"It will be useless—the house is sufficiently guarded, and we have prepared for your reception."

"I am content if you but give me your company, for you are a man on whose feelings it is a delight to play, and should make a pleasant gaoler."

"I shall not be your gaoler, but you will be in safe hands. I have only to warn you that any effort to escape my custody will be useless. You probably know me well enough by this time to be sure of that."

"I am sure of one thing—you will not keep me here. Let me give you my reasons." There was again a sudden but complete change in her manner, as she spoke in a calm, collected tone. I distrusted her every mood, this calmness as much as any.

"I can't stay to listen. I wish you merely to understand that it will avail you nothing to beat against the bars of your cage." As I spoke I turned to leave,

and with a quick rush, while my eyes were off her, she was at the door as soon as I. I put my hand to it to prevent her opening it, and to my chagrin she locked the door herself and put the key in her pocket.

"I have that to say to you which cannot wait even to suit the woman you love. If I must stay here, so shall you ;" and she walked to the other side of the room and threw herself into a low chair, from which she looked at me defiantly.

This manœuvre perplexed me vastly. I was all unwilling to remain, and yet I could not leave now without either a struggle to get possession of the key or by summoning assistance to have the door broken in. I cursed myself for my folly in having allowed the key to remain on the inside, although I could not have foreseen this dilemma.

What was her object? Had she any beyond the desire to keep me in the room while she loaded me with her invective and reproaches? What had been the thought which had struck her, and which had seemed to lead to her sudden assumption of calmness?

"Do you think it strange that I should wish for your company, Count?" she asked in a voice soft and gentle enough to have been the medium of a love message. "For all your ungentle treatment of me and for what I deem your faithlessness, I can find it in me to admire you. I have said some bitter things to you, I know. Forget them. Take them for the ravings only of a violent woman—or better, the revilings of a disappointed one. It is no light disappointment to lose such a man as you." Her tone was one of subtle witchery, tinged with a sadness that might have sprung from a genuine regret. But I knew her; and all the

time she was speaking with this cat-like softness I was racking my brains for the reason of her action.

"If you don't give me that key, I shall summon help and have the door beaten in," I answered. "I am in no mood for any theatrical display."

"I will make a bargain with you. To summon your servants and have to admit to them that you have been locked in by your own prisoner will make you very ridiculous. The strong, clever leader of this great movement caged by a woman! But I will not banter you, and will not make you even ridiculous. Listen to my reasons and you shall have the key. Refuse to listen, and do what you please. You shall not have it from me if I die in defending it. It will be quicker to listen."

"State them quickly. I will give you three minutes," I said, reflecting that what she said was true, and as blind as a fool of a bat to her real intent.

"I will put them very shortly," she answered, speaking in a slow, deliberate tone, altogether foreign to her usual habit. "You love the Princess and she loves you. You are angry with me because I have discovered your secret; but do you suppose that the Princess could endure that Bulgaria should think she decoyed me here that she might imprison me? That is what they would think first. But when the truth is known, as it must be some day, will her woman's heart bear the reproach that she imprisoned me because I surprised her and your secret and told you of it? Is your love so guilty a thing that the bare mention of it is a reason for consigning me to a prison unheard and untried? Is that how a pure Princess can start her reign? Is the avowal of such a love so base an act that anyone a witness of it must be hurried to a gaol to silence her? Think you these are means by which she will conciliate

her new people? Or, taking another reading, can you believe that the Bulgarian people will love a ruler whose ruthless instincts of tyranny are manifested even before she touches the steps of the throne, by dragging away a rival for a man's love and thrusting her into an impromptu gaol because the regular prisons of the country are not available? No, I tell you; you dare not do this thing, and your Princess dare not lend herself to it."

I listened coldly, but not without concern, for I saw the strain of probability that underlay her malicious ingenuity.

"You are not imprisoned for any such act as you pretend, but because you would betray the facts your spies have discovered; and, if you want an additional reason, because you have dared to attempt——"

I stopped, and dashed my hand to my head in horror. In a moment I saw her cursed intention.

I had said no word to the Princess about the deadly rose which this woman had sent to her in my name; and this fiend, guessing by her woman's instinct that the Princess would hurry away after what had been said about our love, had imprisoned me here to delay me, so that even now at the last moment the devilish scheme might succeed. And I, like the fool I was, had been duped by her infernal cunning.

I felt like a madman. She saw by my agitation that I had guessed her scheme, and before I could move she sprang from her chair, and rushed to the door to put her back to it, facing me like a wild beast at bay, to fight for the last few moments that might be so vital to the success of her plot.

"You look agitated, Count. You are not going to leave me?"

"Stand aside, you fiend, or I won't answer for myself. I know your object now. Stand aside; do you hear?" I cried.

"I will not. Touch me if you dare." But the life of the Princess was at stake, and I thought of nothing else.

"Zoiloff! Zoiloff!" I shouted at the top of my voice, and, seizing the Countess by the arm, I strove with all my force to drag her from the door. She fought and struggled like a wild cat, and her strength was so great that for a while she resisted all my efforts, clinging with desperate tenacity to the handle of the door, the lever of which gave her a secure hold.

"Did you call, Count?" came Zoiloff's answer in muffled tones through the heavy door.

"Is the Princess Christina gone?"

"Yes, some minutes since;" and at the words a light of Satanic triumph shone in my companion's eyes, and seemed to give her fresh strength for the struggle. Every moment was precious.

"Get help and burst this door in," I shouted; but even as I shouted the words the thought of the minutes that would be thus wasted maddened me, and I resolved to take the key from the Countess's pocket.

"You force me to this," I said between my teeth, and, seizing her round the waist with one arm, I held her in a grip of iron while I plunged my hand into her pocket. To use up the last possible moment she struggled with frantic energy, writhing and twisting and hindering me till I vow I could have killed her. My blood was up, and the thought of Christina's danger urged me to spare no violence, and half a minute later I had secured the key, and hurled the woman away from me.

As I opened the door, Zoiloff and a couple of men with axes had come up.

"Good God! what has happened?" cried Zoiloff, falling back before my looks.

"Keep that hell-cat safe till I return," I shouted, and, hatless and dishevelled as I was after the tussle for the key, I dashed out of the house, and ran at my top speed through the street.

By good fortune I met one of my grooms exercising a horse close by the house; and before the man could recover from his surprise I had half pulled him from the saddle, clambered up in his place, and was clattering at full gallop towards the Princess's house, heedless of all or any that came in my path.

The moment I reached it I jumped off, sprang up the steps, pealed the great bell and thundered at the heavy knocker, never ceasing till the porter opened the door with a half-scared face.

"The Princess! Quick, man, quick, for your life!" I cried like a madman. "Where is she?"

"In her boudoir," answered the fellow, staring at me as if I had been a wild man, as indeed I almost was. I ran by him and mounted the stairs with leaps and bounds. On the landing above stood a footman, peering down curiously at the disturbance.

"The Princess's room! Show me instantly!" and my mien and voice were so threatening that he fell back pale and frightened, and pointed to a door.

I knocked, but did not wait for an answer.

"Are you there, Christina?" I cried, excitedly, not heeding that I used her Christian name only. "Christina!" I cried again, when I did not see her.

And then, to my inexpressible relief, she came out from an inner room. She was holding a small package,

from which the outer wrapper had already been removed. I rushed forward and tore it from her hand, saying not a word, and heeding nothing of the look of surprise and alarm which my wild presence and strange act had called to her face.

Then with a fervent "Thank God," as I held the accursed thing safe in my grip, crushing the fragile box in my straining fingers, I fell upon a chair, and, clasping one hand to my eyes, tried to fight my way back to calmness.

The rush of relief was an intoxicating delight, and in my rapture at her safety I could have shed tears. For the moment I was utterly unmanned. The agony of suspense during the minutes since I had learnt of her danger had well nigh bereft me of my senses; and the relaxation of the strain, with the knowledge of her bare escape from death, made me as weak as a child.

"You are ill, my friend. What has happened?" she asked in her sweet, sympathetic voice, laying a hand on my shoulder.

The touch was like the balm of Gilead to my ruffled senses, and then a sudden shame fell on me, and in a moment I realised how strange my wild conduct must have appeared in her eyes. I remembered, too, that in my delirium I had called to her by her Christian name. And at the thought my confused and dizzied wits were more jumbled than before, and, strive as I would, I could force no words from my tongue.

My silence alarmed her.

"I will summon help," she said; but I stayed her with a protesting hand, and thus we waited while I struggled for some measure of composure.

Many moments passed in this strained, embarrassing silence, till I was sufficiently master of myself to make

an effort to speak to her. I rose, still holding the crushed little package as fiercely as though it were a thing of life. She looked at me with a smile, intending it to veil her alarm and anxiety.

"Princess, I crave your pardon. I—this package—I——" I stopped, stuttering at a sheer loss for words. A tinge of colour mounted to her face as she said in a tone much less warm than before, and, as I thought, not without a note of rising indignation.

"It is the package you sent me, Count Benderoff."

"No, no, it was sent to you in my name—to poison you." She started back and stared at me. "I will try to explain. I have acted like a madman; I have been almost one, I think. This thing"—holding it up still gripped fiercely—"was sent you to-day by that woman. By the mercy of heaven it arrived while you were absent, and your visit to my house saved you——" And in a shambling, jumbled, half-incoherent way I told her what had occurred.

The colour in her cheeks flowed and ebbed as I spoke, and I saw an ever-varying light in her eyes as they were bent upon me, now in indignation, again in horror, and yet again in gratitude mingled with feelings which now I almost dared to read as my heart dictated.

When I finished my disjointed narrative, she thanked me very simply, though her agitation, heightened colour, and tender glances told me how deeply she was moved. Leaving me for a moment, she returned with the wrapper of the package and a card of mine, on which were scribbled my initials in a handwriting much like my own.

"This was with the packet," she said, giving me the card. "But I have never seen your handwriting." I saw in a moment that the spy in my house

could easily have stolen the card for the Countess Bokara.

"Could your servant identify the messenger who brought it?"

"For what purpose, when we know who sent it?"

"It is a case with which the courts could deal."

"No, no, no," she cried hastily, shaking her head. "I could not do that."

"Well, it does not matter. She is in safe keeping, and I can mete out the punishment myself. I will keep this evidence for future use;" and crushing packet and card and wrapper together, I pushed them into my pocket.

"What do you propose to do, then?" asked the Princess.

"She cannot be left at liberty with our secret in her possession." Till I had uttered the words I did not see their double meaning. But the Princess did instantly, mistaking me indeed, and her face grew so crimson that she turned away to hide her confusion. "I mean the knowledge of our plot," I made haste to add, awkwardly, the explanation serving only to accentuate my clumsy blunder, and add to our mutual embarrassment in the pause that followed.

I was mad with myself for the slip, and yet delighted at what it helped to reveal to me. With an effort I shook myself together, and said in a tone almost cold and formal:

"The sure and certain use she would make of her freedom would be to tell General Kolfort that we are duping him."

"That is a risk we must run," she replied, her voice low and trembling.

"It is one we dare not run. It would be worse than

madness," I protested hastily. The thing was impossible, unless we meant to ruin everything.

"It would have to be done in my name. And that cannot be. You must see this." The agitation in her voice was evident, and she kept her face averted from me.

"Your Highness cannot mean this." The earnestness of my tone moved her, and she cast at me a quick glance of appeal.

"Cannot you see that it is impossible?" But I felt I must be deaf to any appeal.

"You have trusted me so completely that I should be untrue to you and to all concerned in this matter, Princess, if I listened to you. Believe me, it must not be. Her captivity is our only road to safety. We have dealt with this spy of hers, and she herself told me that he was flying the country in a panic. She alone holds this terrible—this knowledge of our plans, and if she remains at large, nothing can save our scheme from shipwreck. You know, even better than I, what effect a word breathed in the General's ear would have. Believe me, I dare not let her free. No harm shall come to her. Not a hair of her head shall be injured; but in our charge she is and must remain. There is no possible alternative."

She locked her fingers tightly in the stress of her perplexity, and a strained, drawn expression showed on her face.

"No, no; it is impossible, impossible," she cried, in a tone of distress. "I see the dangers, but this I—I cannot and will not do."

The mocking words which the Countess had spoken when I was locked in the room with her gave me the clue to the struggle in the Princess's mind, and I dared

not ask her to tell me her reasons, that I might combat them. But with me they had no weight.

"This is no matter, Princess," I ventured to say, "in which any considerations but the most impersonal reasons of policy can be allowed to prevail. I beg you earnestly to pause before taking a step that on my soul I know must be fatal to everything." The words brought a look of flashing reproach.

"You tell me this. Can't you see what would be said of me if I sanctioned such a thing? No, no, no; I cannot, I cannot, I will not," she cried impetuously.

My eyes fell before hers, but yield I would not.

"Will you permit me to withdraw now, and we can speak of this matter another time? Meanwhile——"

"Meanwhile you will do that which will compromise me in the eyes of all Bulgaria," she cried vehemently.

"I shall do no more than your safety and that of all others concerned with us in this matter demands," I answered stubbornly. "We have no other object but your safety and success."

"Do you think I will set my liberty on such an issue—that I will consent to be held up to the whole country, ay, to all Europe, as——" She stopped, and a vivid blush spread over her face, but, drawing herself up with head erect, she added with a truly royal air: "Count Benderoff, as the Princess Christina and your future Queen, I lay my commands upon you to set the Countess Bokara at liberty without delay."

"Your Highness has no truer follower than I, and my future Queen will have no more loyal and faithful subject, but this command I cannot and will not obey."

I bowed low, and, raising my head, met her look with one as firm and resolute as her own.

We stood thus for perhaps half a minute, and then a striking change came over her face. Her eyes fell, and I thought I had won. But it was no more than a change of weapons on her part.

She came close to me and took my hand in both hers, and looked then into my eyes with a soft light that only love could kindle.

"What you refuse as a command, grant me as a favour. I plead to you as a woman to do what I ask. I pray you by whatever regard you may have for me. Must I plead in vain?" Her hands were trembling in mine and her voice quivering as she sought my eyes and held them with a look of yearning love that left me no room for any thought but how to please her.

What could I do, loving her as I did with all my heart, but yield?

CHAPTER XV

A HOPELESS OUTLOOK

EVEN while I was on my way from the Princess Christina's house I began to realise the consequences of the mistake we were making. I had been miserably weak to give way, and, although my head was half giddy with the rapturous remembrance of her words and glances, and dazed with the thought that she had appealed to my love, I was angry with myself for having yielded.

I half dreaded to meet Zoiloff. I knew what that sturdy fellow would say, and was inclined to fear lest he should make a shrewd guess at the reasons which had influenced me. One thing was certain, he must not be present when I saw the Countess; for I knew that she would blurt out the truth in her sneering, vindictive tone.

She would publish it, too, far and wide, and in a few days all Sofia would ring with the secret of my love for Christina and of hers for me. That alone was enough to ruin the cause, since it must inevitably rouse old Kolfort's suspicions.

When I reached the house I was told that Zoiloff was with the Countess Bokara, and I sent for him. I said in as few words as possible that it had been decided to let the woman go free, and I gave some more or less fictitious reasons of policy for it. But they did not impose on him for an instant.

"It is wrong, Count, absolutely wrong, and you should never have consented. She will ruin everything. I propose that we just ignore the Princess's wish and keep that fiend close all the same."

"I have passed my word, Zoiloff."

"I am very sorry to hear it, but I haven't; and there's nothing to prevent your setting her free and my taking her again. Everything is ready, as you know, and the thing would be easy enough."

"No, I can be no party to it," I answered firmly, although the notion pleased and tempted me.

"Then you may as well throw up the sponge." He spoke angrily.

"It may still be possible to blind the General's eyes."

"You are more sanguine than you look or your tone implies if you think so. I don't believe it for a moment. There's always something goes wrong where a woman is concerned."

"I will send this one packing, and then we can consult."

"There's not much left worth consulting about," he answered as I left him.

The Countess greeted me with a sharp, shrewd look, and then her face showed a keen disappointment.

"I have failed, I see. You needn't tell me," she said.

"You are not yet a murderess—at least of the Princess," I returned, harshly, for I hated the woman.

"You have taken a long time over your rescue and love business; but I suppose you had much to talk about. It's the way of lovers!" she cried with a laugh. "Besides you had to settle what to do with inconvenient me. I am afraid I am very much in your

way, Count—quite as much trouble to you as if you had remained faithful to me.”

“If I had my way you would not give me much more trouble.”

“Ah, then I was right. I knew that she would never dare to try and keep me a prisoner. Will you see that a carriage is ready for me?” She spoke in a tone of indifference.

“If you have any gratitude in your nature you will remember that it is to the Princess that you owe your liberty—to the woman whose life you have just failed to take.”

“And am bitterly regretting my failure. That is my gratitude. But why cant to me of gratitude. Do you suppose she has done this for my sake? Nonsense; I told you her reasons before you went to her. Am I a fool, that you prate to me in this childish strain? I tell you I am an enemy, and a woman to be feared. She is a fool to let me go, and I know it as well as you. Were the positions reversed—but there, she has given you a heavy task, Count, heavy enough to tax even your cleverness; and you can lay your plans on this one solid and sure foundation—that I will do my worst against you and her.”

I made no answer, and, ringing a bell, ordered a carriage to be brought round at once.

“You look very solemn, Count,” she said, when the servant had left the room and I was going. “And you have plenty of reason. But I’ll do you one favour, and tell you that I have already begun my work, and have told that ill-bred soldier who was here and seems to be in your confidence the whole story of your love for the fair Christina; and it had a very pretty effect upon him. But it prepared him, no doubt, for this step,”

and she laughed insolently. "At any rate you can be frank with him without that shamefacedness with which one man speaks to another of his love. What he is thinking about it to-day—and I was careful to sow the seeds of fruitful contemplation in his mind—all Sofia will be openly talking to-morrow, including your new Russian friends. It was injudicious of you, wasn't it, to leave me such a companion?"

I could endure no more of her taunts, and went out of the room, closing the door quickly to shut out the sound of her mocking laughter. When the carriage was announced I went back to fetch her, and, as if her malicious instinct could always hit upon the mood most exactly calculated to jar upon my nerves, she was now disposed to play the high society dame, and, with all the airs and graces of a capricious beauty, was for delaying me to chatter idle nothings, in a tone of empty frivol, about the weather, the recent ball, and my health, until I cut her short by saying sternly:

"The carriage is waiting for you, Countess, and I have no time for this wearying badinage."

"I thought you might wish your servants to think this was merely a call of ceremony;" and, as if to irritate me with these little peltings of frivolity, she continued to chatter in the same tone until she had taken her seat in the carriage. Then, with a quick change of manner, and a malignant glance at me, she said:

"When we meet again you may find the positions reversed, Count, for I warn you to look to yourself."

I gave no sign of even having heard her, and watched in silence as the carriage drove off.

"There goes our last hope," said Zoiloff, looking moodily after the carriage, as though he would have

given all he was worth to have dashed after it, and have torn the Countess out of it back to captivity.

"Now let us consider what to do next," I replied.

"There is nothing to do next, or after," he said, in the same moody tone. "When such a woman holds the future of our scheme in her hands we can do nothing but prepare for the worst, and look out for the best means of escape. It will soon be a case of *sauve qui peut*."

"I shall fight on till it comes, then, and so will you, my friend, when this mood has passed." I took him into my private room and, putting wine and cigars before him, set to work to try and shape a course to suit the altered aspect of affairs.

My own opinion was not much brighter than his; but I sought to persuade him, and myself too, that matters might yet be mended. There was one possible door of hope. The Countess meant to have her revenge, and, as she had frankly said, we must base all our plans on her implacable enmity. But she had other ends than those of mere personal vengeance. She hated Christina bitterly, but she loved the Russians no better. Her aim was to keep her Prince on the throne, and to betray us at once would certainly injure him by forcing General Kolfort to act immediately, not only against us, but against the Prince. The latter would be frightened and jockeyed out of the throne, to make room, not for Christina, but for some more pliable tool; and the Countess was quite shrewd enough to foresee that.

"I am inclined to believe," I said, after we had discussed the position at great length, "that she will seek her ends first by other means than by betraying us to Kolfort—some scheme or other against the Prin-

cess or myself personally, perhaps; but something which may take time to work out. She will cling to the hope of retaining the Prince on the throne to the last possible moment; and she may reckon, as she has done hitherto, that by removing the Princess the Russian scheme will be so maimed that the Prince may be able to retrieve and retain his position—at all events for a time. She may now include me in some such plan of assassination. The question for us to consider is, then, how soon we can complete our arrangements, by hurrying them forward at fever heat, so as to make us indifferent to what Kolfort can do.”

I continued to urge this from every standpoint, until I saw with great satisfaction that Zoiloff's enthusiasm began to heat again. But suddenly his face clouded, and he said:

“Are you forgetting the strange story she is going to tell about yourself and the Princess? I know nothing of it, of course,” he added, as though in assurance of his faith in me. “But if such a tale should reach old Kolfort—and she seemed mad enough to scream it from the housetops—you can judge what he may think.”

“There is a ready answer to it,” I returned, gloomy now in my turn at the thought behind my words.

“You mean denial. I don't like to speak of this, Count.”

“I do not mean denial only in words. They count for little enough in a time like this,” I replied bitterly.

“What then?”

“The Princess's only answer will be the hurrying forward of her marriage with the Duke Sergius. It is the inevitable corollary of her decision to-day.”

“By God, but you are a man, Count!” cried Zoiloff,

with a look of genuine sympathy, as if he felt instinctively what such words must cost me. "From this hour I will never again question a single order you give or decision you take." He held out his hand, and grasped mine in a warm pledge of earnest friendship. "We will go on, as you say, and frustrate this she-devil yet—or fall in the effort."

A long silence followed, in which we were both busy with our own thoughts; and when the silence was broken we went on with a long, detailed discussion of the means to be adopted to quicken our preparations and expedite the arrangements that should make us indifferent to any action by General Kolfort.

The work interested us both absorbingly, and while Zoiloff remained with me, and my thoughts were occupied in planning the work to be done, I was even inclined to accept my own arguments that all was not yet lost.

But when he had left me a relapse came, and I seemed to be overwhelmed with a sense of the weariness and futility of it all. I had nothing now to gain. A few hours had changed everything for me, and all my enthusiasm had evaporated, like the sparkle from flat wine.

Bulgaria might profit, but what was Bulgaria to me? I had not been fighting for Bulgaria, but for Christina; and what prospect was there now for her but the gloomiest? I had gained the priceless treasure of her love; but with the very ecstasy of the knowledge had come the bane that I could never even win happiness for her.

I laid bare my heart to myself in this bitter self-communing. I had tried to persuade myself before that mine was that rare thing—the rarest on earth, indeed—selfless love; but I knew now that that had

been the flimsiest gauze of self-deceit veiling the secret hopes and desires that had urged me forward. Out of the inmost thoughts came up now the skeletons of my lost desires, gibbering and mouthing and mocking me with the hopelessness of my love.

If I could have made her happy, have helped her to realise the dream of her life as the Virgin Queen pouring on this distracted people the infinite blessings of freedom and happiness, herself a bright, conspicuous example of innocence and purity to all the world, I might have been content to worship even while I served her. But to think of her as the wife of the sensual brute I detested, forced to submit to his loathsome endearments, and to smile and frown upon him in his humours, was like a very torment of hell to me. And for her it must be ten thousand times worse. Her life, mated with a man she abhorred, would be one long, living lie, the canker of which must blight her every purpose, and destroy every hope in her heart.

And yet I, loving her and beloved by her, was to help her to this life of fair-seeming misery and honoured dishonour. I could not and would not, I cried in my heart—and yet I knew I must. There was no escape now from it. As I had told Zoiloff in my despair, the hastening of the marriage was the one possible means of averting that instant ruin in which the power of the at present all-powerful Russian agents could involve us all.

Harder than all else to bear, however, was the thought that I myself must pass that inexorable sentence upon her. She had made it essential by her shrinking woman's fear of how her act would be read in the eyes of Europe; but it was left for me to show her the full consequences of what she had done.

In my frenzy I was tempted to regret that I had saved her from the infinitely more merciful fate of death. Deeply as I loved her, I would vastly rather see her dead than the wife of the man whose wife she was now inevitably bound to be.

For a moment a wild thought rushed through my mind—that I should induce her to fly the country with me. But the thought was as great a treachery to her as the act would be treacherous to those whose cause she championed with such pure-souled enthusiasm. I recalled with the iciness of a lover's despair her declaration that she would even become the wife of this man, if no other path were open, rather than abandon the cause she had espoused.

There was no escape ; and when at length I threw myself on my bed, brain-wearied with the long wild fighting against the inevitable, it was only that the torture of my waking thoughts should be reproduced with all the grotesque horrors of oppressive, sickening dreams.

I awoke with the dawn, dreading the coming of the hour that would bring with it the ordeal of the interview.

For myself my course was soon decided. I would keep my word, and go through with the task of leading the movement to such a successful issue as we could yet snatch from the dangers surrounding and threatening it. But the hour that saw her safely seated on the throne should be my last in the country.

I was revolving these gloomy thoughts over an untasted breakfast when Spernow came.

"You look ill, Count ;" for the struggle had written its effects in my face. "Yesterday's doings have upset you."

"It is nothing worse than a headache," I answered carelessly.

"I hope your nerves are not unstrung. You will need a clear head to-day unless I have read things wrongly."

"What next?" I felt that nothing which could happen now would either interest or trouble me. I had lost the one thing which I desired, and life itself might go for aught I cared.

"I was at a house last night and heard something which you must know at once. It concerns you closely, and spells danger."

"What was it?" Feel interested I could not, feign it I would not.

"The Duke Sergius has resolved to force a quarrel upon you. He has some deadly grievance. I heard it incidentally, but—Why, Count, what is the matter?"

He might well be astonished. The news was the one thing on earth that could have changed me, the one thing that might yet change everything. In an instant my lassitude and despair fell away like a cloak. My blood warmed, my heart beat fast, my cheeks glowed again, and life was worth living and risking. Even if I were destined to go straight to my death at the hands of the rival I hated, I should have a moment of real enjoyable life, while, if my hand were true and my skill what I believed it and I killed him—I could not stay to think, but in my eager hope that the news might be true I plied Spernow with question after question, testing his story, till he might well have deemed me insane.

"Of all the gifts and riches of the earth that you could bring me, Spernow," I cried in my vehemence, "there is none I would have in preference to this news. By Heaven, man, but you have made me live again!"

CHAPTER XVI

"IF I WERE A WOMAN"

WE had been together about half an hour, discussing eagerly the news which Spernow had brought, when Zoiloff arrived. His face showed that he too had passed anxious hours since we parted. I received him with a laugh and rallied him upon his looks, and then told him the news.

He had not the same intense personal interest in it that I had, and he received it very differently ; though his friendship made him understand my feelings.

"It is her first step," he said, gravely. "We must act warily."

"A necessity for others besides ourselves," I retorted.

"It is not certain what form his hostility will take. He may not care to quarrel openly with you, Count ; although, if he does, you know he is not a swordsman to be taken lightly."

"He would serve me no ill turn were he to send his sword through my heart," I answered, and meant every word I said.

"That would be an ill enough turn for us, though."

"Let us go to the gallery and see. I have scarcely closed my eyes all night, and when Spernow came he found me hipped and down. It will be a good test for my nerves. If I can hold my own against you

under such conditions, we need not be doubtful about this other affair."

In a few minutes we were busy with the foils, and I told Zoiloff to try with all the skill at his command to beat me. For myself, I tried to make myself believe for the moment that he was the man whom I might have to meet, and I put forth every effort. I never fenced more skilfully or with more spirit, now limiting myself only to defensive measures and now forcing the attack with vehement and even fiery impetuosity.

"I cannot hold you, Count," said Zoiloff, at length; "I have not touched you once, except that graze on the leg, and you have had me three times badly. If this were in earnest I should be a dead man. But, remember, you know my work now, and that I am not the Duke's equal with the sword."

"I must take that risk, and shall not take it without pleasure, I assure you."

"But that's not the only risk to be taken."

"You are in a despondent mood, my friend," I said, for I knew he referred to what General Kolfort might do afterwards. "Let's meet them one at a time. This one faced and overcome may mean much to us; and, at any rate, will put us in good heart for what may follow." My spirits were now as high as previously they had been depressed, and once again I was full of fight.

Zoiloff told me what he had already done to expedite our plans, and when I went to do my regimental work even the knowledge of what I had to tell Christina she must be prepared to do had become less oppressive and disheartening.

On my return home, however, I found a note from Mademoiselle Broumoff, asking me to see Christina at

once. "General Kolfort has been with her this morning, and something passed which has upset the Princess extremely. Although she has not told me that she wishes to see you, I am sure of it. Don't mention this letter."

This alarmed me, and early in the afternoon I was at her house. I found her looking troubled and agitated, and so pale that I was filled with concern. She received me as graciously as usual, but I could detect a touch of shrinking reserve.

"I hope you have no ill news; we cannot, of course, expect a big scheme like ours to go forward without an occasional check," I said.

"There must be no check—none if I can prevent it, that is." She spoke very sadly, and then forced a smile to her face.

"You have had some news, I see," I said after a pause.

"Yes, I have bad news; I have had General Kolfort here."

"His visit was probably the outcome of yesterday's event."

"Have you come to upbraid me with what you think my weakness?" she cried quickly, with a swift glance of reproach.

"No, indeed not. But when the Countess Bokara left me she declared with all the malice in her that she would do her utmost to ruin us all. I judge that she has commenced—that is all."

"She cannot ruin us. Let her do her worst." It was easy to see, however, that the first blow had been a telling one. Then a thought struck me.

"I think I can tell you the purport of General Kolfort's message," I said quietly. "He is anxious to

push forward a certain step in his plans to bind you to him. I mean, of course, your marriage."

Her face grew scarlet, and I guessed it was at the remembrance of the bluntness with which the General would have told her what he had heard about us. I could judge well enough the way he would speak.

"Have you seen him?" she asked after a pause.

"No; but I foresaw what must happen," I answered gently. "It was inevitable. The only practical proof you could give him of the falseness of the rumour that that woman has set abroad."

She locked her fingers tightly together, and her face was drawn and troubled. My heart ached for her. Remembering my own sorrow, I could gauge the bitterness of hers. Presently, in a low tone of despair, she said:

"The marriage is to take place in three days;" and, hiding her face then in her hands, she abandoned herself to emotions which she could no longer control. I turned to the window and looked out, that she might have time to regain some measure of calmness.

Presently I heard the rustle of her dress, and I turned round and went back to her.

"You have caught me in a moment of weakness, Count," she said, smiling through the cloud on her brow and in her eyes. "I think you had better leave me."

"I came prepared for the news. Indeed, I came to tell you myself that you must be ready to hear it."

"I would rather have heard it from you;" and she smiled wearily. Then, laying her hands impulsively in mine, she said sweetly but mournfully: "It is hard to inflict sorrow like this, and I do not hide from myself, dear friend, that this must give you pain. Believe

me, that thought is not my least grief in this. If I were only a woman," she cried, with a deep sigh.

Her words and tenderness almost unmanned me. I had no words to reply, but stood still, holding her hands in mine and meeting her gaze with glances that spoke the love I felt.

"I have no thought but for your happiness," I murmured at length.

"Happiness?" she whispered; and her eyes closed an instant as she drew a deep breath as of unbearable pain. Then she mastered her emotion. "I must never see you alone again, Count. I ought not to have seen you now, but—I am a woman. I felt I must thank you once alone, and tell you how it wounds me to wound you thus. Others may think of me as ambitious, cold, unwomanly, selling myself for a throne, a heartless creature without the attributes and qualities of my sex. But you will know the truth. You must know it, even if I bare my inmost heart in telling you. You will not think ill of me, though I have made you so poor a requital for all that you have done and would do for me. Do you think I am seeking my happiness in this?"

"Forgive me that word. If I know what you are suffering in this it is because my own heart tells me; and I dare not utter all that it tells me."

"You are a strong man and will fight it down."

"I shall never forget," I cried earnestly, my voice hoarse with passion. "And never again so long as my heart beats will it hold a feeling such as that which fills it now."

This pleased her, and she smiled sweetly and tenderly, while the clasp of her fingers tightened on mine.

"Would God it could have gone otherwise for us,"

she breathed, her eyes lingering lovingly on my face, with infinite sadness and yearning.

I carried her fingers to my hot lips and kissed them fervently.

"Go, go," she cried passionately at the touch of my lips. "Go, or I shall bid you stay, let the consequences be what they will."

I looked up into her radiant face, now fired with her passion.

"One touch of your lips, if only to ease my suffering."

The ruby colour flowed rich and deep over her face, and, bending forward, she kissed me on the forehead.

"Go, in pity for me, go," she cried, excitedly.

One moment longer I stood, gazing at her with my soul in my eyes, feasting my senses on the signs of her love, and then I tore myself away. A last glance as I left the room showed me that she had thrown herself back in her chair with her hands clasped in front of her face.

I rushed back to my house, my head bewildered and dizzied with the sweet delirium of her avowed love, and I sat like a crazy loon for hours, running over and over again in thought all the incidents of the scene.

She loved me. Nothing could rob me of the sweetness of that knowledge. All else that could happen was as nothing compared to that. The plot might succeed or fail ; she loved me. Bulgaria might be free or enslaved ; she loved me. The Russians might triumph or fail ; she loved me. It was the one balm for every sorrow, one true note of joy in every trial ; she loved me ; and I was mad with the delight of it all.

In the early evening Spernow came to me ; and then

I remembered with an effort—for all memory was swallowed up in the one delicious remembrance of her love avowal—that I had promised to go out with him. I did not care whether I went or stayed ; what I said or did, all was alike indifferent to me ; but when he urged me, I dressed and went with him. As we drove along he said something, however, which brought my intoxicated wits together.

"Duke Sergius will be here to-night, Count. We shall see what he means to do." I laughed so loudly that he looked at me in surprise. What cared I for the Duke Sergius? I carried a charmed life, for Christina loved me. He might marry her: but it was I had her heart. If he killed me, he could not alter that. And whether I lived or died mattered nothing now. I hoped he would quarrel with me. "To be married in three days." Marriages are not made with the dead, my lord Duke, I thought, and laughed again.

"If he wants to quarrel he will find me ready enough," I said, boastfully and noisily ; but before I entered the house I had put a restraint upon myself and wore my usual reserve, covering up that mad, wild, whirling passion that was heating every vein in my body. I soon saw, too, there was a cause to be wary.

"His friends are in strong force here," muttered Spernow, as together we entered the room and were greeted by our host, a man named Metzler, who led us forward chatting pleasantly about nothing.

There were about a dozen of us in all in the room, and the first glance showed me that it was intended to be a wet, wild night. Three or four of the men I knew to be dare-devil scapegraces, hard drinkers and harder players even for that city of hard drinking and high gambling, and it was easy to see by their faces that

some of them had made haste to begin, for they were already flushed and excited. It was the kind of party where an empty glass was considered a sign of discourtesy to the host.

The Duke was gambling, but saw me enter, and when I approached him gave me no more than a surly nod in place of his customary rather effusive greeting. I augured well from this, but was careful to be particularly courteous.

In a few minutes Spernow and I were seated at a table playing some silly card game or other for fairly high stakes. I felt no interest in it, and cared not one jot whether I won or lost. I staked moderately and drank very sparingly, finding my amusement in watching the flushed eagerness of the men about me; the noisy laughter when they won, and the muttered oaths when fortune went against them.

I glanced now and again at the other tables, and I noticed that the Duke was in much the same mood as myself, and twice caught him scowling angrily and darkly at me. Each time I laughed in my heart and smiled pleasantly with my lips.

"Fortune with you, Duke?" I cried the second time.

"My turn is coming," he answered, with an expression that in a dog or a wolf you would call a snarl.

"Well, don't be afraid to back it when it does come. I'm winning," I said with another smile, as though cards were the one absorbing thought in my head just then. But he seemed to put his own interpretation on my words, for he answered in a surly tone:

"Ah! your luck may change;" and he turned to his game again.

After an hour or two a halt was called for supper,

and I observed that the Duke scrupulously avoided me. I noticed, too, that he had begun to drink much more freely, and while I chatted with the men about me I kept a close watch upon all that he did.

As soon as supper was finished the glasses were refilled and the gambling began again.

"Thank Heaven that's over; now we can settle down to business," said one of the men near me, who had been a high player and a heavy loser; and that voiced the thoughts of most men in the room.

An hour later I noticed that Spernow was infected with the mania for high play. He was staking large amounts, which I knew he could not afford to lose, and he was losing them. I gave him a warning look or two, but he would pay no heed; and to create a diversion I declared that I had played enough. It was all to no purpose, however. It did not check him, and it irritated the men about us.

For that I cared nothing, but it brought the crisis for which I had been waiting. The men were urging me to continue, and I was refusing, when I heard the Duke say to a man at his table, in a voice intentionally loud enough to be heard by all:

"Nothing like cards to test a man's pluck;" and he accompanied the words with a sneer and a shrug of the shoulders.

I would not take the words to myself, though I knew, as did the rest, that they were flung at me.

"I would rather not play again," I said to those about me.

"I don't suppose we are to stop, gentlemen, to please one man's caprice—or cowardice, or whatever you call it," said the Duke insolently.

"You will not mind if we resume, Count?" said our

host, nervously, trying to fill the awkward pause that followed the words.

"Not in the least," I answered, pleasantly, for all the anger that began to stir in me. "I will look on."

"No, no, Metzler," cried the Duke noisily. "I object to that. Lookers-on can see too much and can make use of their knowledge. If Count Benderoff is too careful of his money to play, you should ask him to retire."

"That is the third unpleasant thing you have said about me in as many minutes," I said, turning pointedly to him, but speaking coolly.

"Is it?" and he laughed insolently. "Well, you're doing a deuced unpleasant thing, and I suppose I may express my opinion." This time two of the other men sniggered.

"I have merely expressed a wish to play no more."

"And you do it with an air of a highly virtuous priest with a mission to teach us how to behave ourselves. We don't want you Englishmen or Roumanians, or whatever you please to call yourself, coming here to set up any canting standard of morals. We can look after ourselves," he sneered, his face flushed and his eyes glittering angrily.

The situation was fast growing serious, and every man stopped to watch us two.

"I have done nothing of the kind, as you and these gentlemen know quite well. It seems that you wish to insult me wantonly."

"Do you mean to say that I don't speak the truth, Count Benderoff?" he cried, rising and coming towards me.

"Gentlemen, this has surely gone far enough," said Metzler, his face pale, as he put himself between us



"I STRUCK HIM A VIOLENT BLOW AND KNOCKED HIM DOWN."

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hurriedly. "The Count has only expressed a desire not to play any longer, and, of course, in my house I should not think of urging him;" and he glanced at the rest, as if asking them to interfere.

"Our host's views are my answer to you," I said.

But the Duke was bent on the quarrel.

"A very discreet shield," he sneered, and then his passion broke out. "What I said I maintain," he continued furiously. "You have tried deliberately to break up the party with your infernally domineering interference. I have had far too much of your interference, not only here but elsewhere. I'll have no more of it. Who are you, to come thrusting yourself into concerns that are nothing to you? If you don't like our company, leave it; and if you don't like the country, leave that too. And the sooner the better. This is no garbage-heap for either renegade Roumanians or cowardly English to be carted here;" and he laughed in my face.

My blood boiled at his words, but I meant the quarrel to go even farther yet, and after a pause of dead silence I answered, clipping my words short:

"Rather a hunting-ground where a fortune may be picked up by any drunken, bankrupt Russian duke, infamous enough to stoop to any cowardly baseness."

He could scarce restrain himself to hear me out before he flung himself at me in wild, desperate rage.

I caught his arm in my left hand as it was raised, and flinging out my right with all my strength I struck him a violent blow on the mouth and knocked him down.

In another moment the men had thrown themselves between us, holding him as he struggled to his feet

and drew his sword, striving to get at me and cursing wildly.

I was as cool now outwardly as if nothing had happened, and in my heart a feeling of almost wild exultation throbbed and rushed.

"You are all witnesses, gentlemen," I said to the men near me, "that from the first this quarrel has been forced upon me. Lieutenant Spernow, for the present you will act for me."

"I will have your life for this!" cried the Duke, mad with rage.

I made no reply. There was nothing more to be gained by any further taunts.

"I am sorry this has happened here and to-night," I said to my host. "But you must have seen it was none of my seeking. You will excuse me if I go."

I left, and walked home with a feeling of rare pleasure at the thought of the coming fight. If I did not punish him for his foul insult, then surely was I what he had said—a coward.

CHAPTER XVII

A DASTARDLY SCHEME

AS soon as I reached home I despatched a servant in hot haste for Zoiloff, and when he arrived I told him what had happened.

"He forced the quarrel on you?" he asked.

"Certainly. I was willing enough, Heaven knows; but there was not a man in the room who would not have to say that I bore his insults till I must have seemed all but a coward. But I wanted to make this thing a life and death affair. And it is that."

"You will kill him?" he asked, his dark eyes glowing.

"If I can," I replied, shortly and sternly.

"Good. But Heaven knows what will happen afterwards. Though if the thing gets wind your meeting may be prevented. Old Kolfort will be mad; and if he had a tool there, as is most probable, you may be arrested before morning."

"I never thought of that, or I would have finished the thing on the spot."

"And gained the reputation of having killed a man in his cups. Thank Heaven you didn't think of it. I suppose the man means to fight, but, like his master, Kolfort, he's such a snake you never know what he does mean till he has done it."

"No man who spoke as he did could hope to escape

a fight," I replied, growing uneasy at his words. "What do you suspect? After a blow, too, he must fight."

"He's the sort of man who'd be capable of anything. He might insult you openly like that, send the challenge, and then have you seized secretly and shut up, and when you didn't appear on the ground in the morning, post you for a coward. I know him."

"It would be an infernal move!" I cried hotly.

"It would be reckoned a smart Russian trick," said Zoiloff drily.

"Then, we'll checkmate it. We'll have enough men here to make my arrest impossible; or, better still, perhaps I'll pass the night somewhere else. You and Spernow can arrange all the preliminaries of the meeting, and appoint a meeting somewhere to-morrow morning, but not fix the actual ground until that appointment is kept by him and his seconds only. I will be where you can readily fetch me."

"Good! Yes, we'll do that. You'll have choice of weapons. What shall they be? I should choose pistols. You're sure to kill him."

"He shall have a chance to save his life. We'll have swords. But, mind, the fight is to be to the death. No stopping for a trickle of blood!"

"That's the spirit I like," cried Zoiloff bluntly; and then we discussed the plan I had suggested. He told me where I could sleep and he and Spernow could find me in the morning.

"I should be off at once if I were you—and, mind, get a night's rest. You'll need all your skill, even if we succeed in bringing him up to the scratch."

"I'll go the moment Spernow arrives."

"Then take my advice. Let your people have a

horse saddled at once and kept in readiness close to some back way out. I know these Russian dodges."

I adopted the suggestion at once, and, sending for my head groom, Markov, told him to saddle my horse and his, where to station himself, and to be prepared to be away with me for the night; and, lastly, to hold his tongue. After that I changed hurriedly into an undress uniform, got together the one or two things I should need, and joined Zoiloff.

"I don't like this long wait," he said impatiently. "I seem to smell something wrong. Why do they keep Spernow like this? I should go, Count, if I were you."

"I can't go till I know the man's making a show of fighting, at any rate."

"Picket one or two of our fellows, then, to give us warning. The house may be surrounded before we know anything has happened."

"It isn't necessary. The place is like a rabbit warren; there's an underground passage that lets out a hundred yards away, and it's there I've told the man to have the horses. Half a regiment couldn't keep me in if I wanted to get out."

"Some infernal spy or other may have found that out;" and then, to satisfy him, I sent out half a dozen men to keep watch.

A quarter of an hour later Spernow arrived, but not before Zoiloff's patience had long given out. Spernow explained that the delay had been caused at the other house, and not by any fault of his own.

"Did anyone leave before you?"

"Oh, yes; the meeting broke up soon after the Count left."

"Good-night, Count," cried Zoiloff instantly. "Don't lose another moment."

"The fight is to come off?" I asked eagerly.

"Of course," said Spernow, in surprise, not guessing our suspicions.

"Then good-night. Zoiloff will explain everything;" and as I turned to leave a servant came hurrying in, pale and excited, to say that a number of men, some in uniform, were approaching the house, and had tried to detain him. The next moment a furious summons at the front door told us they had arrived.

Before the noise had ceased to reverberate through the house, I was in the underground passage, hurrying at full speed to the place where the horses were awaiting me. Zoiloff's suggestion that General Kolfort might know of the secret passage gave me a twinge of uneasiness, and as I paused to open the little door of outlet my fears were more than verified, for I heard the cries of men as they entered the passage from the house end. I held a revolver ready as I slipped out into the night, and at a little distance to the left I caught sight of a couple of men, just perceptible as shadows in the gloom.

Guessing that they were after me, and had not known quite where to lie in wait, I ran swiftly in the opposite direction, fortunately to the spot where I should find my horse. Once in the saddle, I did not fear pursuit. They saw me, despite all my precaution, and raised a shout, while one of them fired a pistol, presumably as a signal, and then I heard them come clattering after me.

The shot was answered by others, and the place seemed alive with men. But I was near to the horses now, and could see them in the little clump of trees where I had told Markov to wait.

"Have you seen any horsemen about?" I asked, as I sprang into the saddle.

"No, sir," replied the groom, but at that moment the sound of galloping came from both directions.

There was going to be a tussle after all, it seemed.

"You have your pistols. If anyone tries to stop us, you have my orders to fire—but only at the horses, mind. Follow me close."

We were on a small heath, and I pricked my horse into an easy canter in the direction I had to take to get to the place of which Zoiloff had told me.

"Halt! Who goes there?" and the horseman checked his steed with a rattle of steel that told me he was a cavalryman.

"A friend," said I, but not drawing rein.

"Halt!" came the cry again. The horseman behind was now coming up fast, and I could hear the sounds of the others scurrying after us on foot.

"I'm in a hurry, and can't wait," I said.

"Halt, or I shall fire," and I heard him get his carbine; but I was not going to be trapped by a single cavalryman, and before he had an idea of my intention I had carried it into execution.

We were nearly abreast of him, cantering easily, when I wheeled my horse around, dug the spurs into his sides, dashed right against the man who had challenged me, dragged his weapon from his hands, and flung it on the ground.

"Now," I called to the groom, "as fast as the wind, and bend low;" and together we rattled over the heath at a pace that made pursuit hopeless, even had the two men behind been inclined for a chase. But they were not. A couple of shots were fired after us, but as the darkness hid our forms, and the grass deadened our horses' footfalls, they were but random shots, not destined to find their billets in our bodies.

After a sharp burst for some ten minutes, I drew rein and listened. Not a sound. I had shaken off the pursuit. At the same time I deemed it advisable to take a roundabout route to our destination, and in this Markov, who knew every square inch of the country, was able to guide me.

We reached the place without further mishap ; and Zoiloff's name acted like a magic pass-word to secure the accommodation we needed. Thus my Russian friends had not even the satisfaction of robbing me of my night's rest.

I woke in the morning, all anxiety to know how Zoiloff and Spernow had fared, what arrangements had been made, and whether, after all, we should succeed in bringing off the fight without interruption.

I could also take a clearer view of the seriousness of the attempt made to capture me on the previous night. The more I considered it the less I liked it, for I read in it a determination on the part of General Kolfort to remove me from his path, at all events, until after the marriage of the Princess. He had viewed the fact of our love as a possible stumbling-block in the path of his policy, and was resolved to deal with it in his usual drastic way ; and it was easy enough to see that even after the duel he would continue to pursue me.

Zoiloff arrived while I was in this rather gloomy, meditative mood.

"I have been speculating all the night whether I should find you here, Count, for I could not learn from the men who came to your house whether they had caught you or not. They were wild at not finding you there, and ransacked the place from cellar to roof ; and almost the first place they searched was that underground passage. I concluded, of course, that they

would have men posted at the other end, and feared therefore that they had got you in a trap. How did you escape?"

I told him briefly what had happened, and that only his forethought had saved me.

"And what of the duel?" I concluded eagerly.

"All is right, so far, I'm glad to say. Of course, the Duke couldn't appear to back out in the least; and his men represented him as full of fight. We had a bit of a tussle over the conditions, but I wouldn't give way. They wanted me to fix the time and place at once; but I told them pretty plainly that to do that might be doing no more than giving an excellent appointment for making the arrest that had just failed, and, in short, that it was impossible. In the end they had no option but to agree, and we are to meet at a little village about five miles north of here at nine o'clock, and then settle the ground. What I propose is that you should ride on about a couple of miles further—I know a splendid place for a meeting there; your man will probably know the ground; and if I find no treachery in the wind I'll bring them on. If there is anything wrong, I'll fix another spot, and let you know somehow. But I think it'll be all right. The men acting for him are perfectly straight."

"Yes," I assented readily. "It's an excellent plan."

"But what about afterwards? If you kill him, there will be the deuce to pay; and I should think you will have to fly the country for a while at least."

"No, I shall go back to Sofia and face it out. Men have been killed in duels before. The fight was forced upon me, and everything's in perfect order. Why should I run away?"

"Russian dukes are not often killed in duels, espe-

cially when so essential to Russian schemes," he answered drily.

"I shall take my chance of the consequences. We're not so feeble that they can do what they like to me. I shall face it out."

"How would it be to stop short of killing him?"

"My dear Zoiloff, if you had said to you what was said to me, you would view the thing as I do," I said sternly, and he made no reply.

I called in my man then, and Zoiloff gave him precise instructions which way we were to ride, and where to wait; and soon afterwards he started to meet the duke and his seconds. I mounted within a few minutes of his departure, and as I rode at an easy pace I was very thoughtful, though exultant at the prospect of the encounter.

It was a glorious morning. The sun was hot and bright, but a fresh, invigorating breeze was blowing, and the country looked beautiful. The hardy, stalwart peasantry, men and women alike, were at work everywhere in the fields, toiling with that industry for which they are famed in all the East; and, save that here and there were to be seen the ruined homesteads which told their grim story of the fearful struggle of a few years previously, the landscape seemed redolent of the new blessing of content which the better rule of the Prince had brought in its train, and full of the promise of prosperity, if only the ban of political intrigue could be removed—certainly a land of promise with a great future under a ruler with such high ideals and motives as Christina.

As I thought of it, she seemed farther removed from me than ever. She loved me, and the knowledge was ineffably sweet; but it was a love that could have

no fruition ; and my face darkened as I thought of the man who was to come between us—not only to thwart our love, but also to stand between her and the realisation of the dream and hopes of her life for these people. My heart was as iron towards him ; and the bare thought of his foul treachery in this dastardly attempt to have me branded as a coward—for I did not hesitate to accept that theory of his act—filled me with an irresistible impulse to take his life. I recalled his burning words of insult and contumely, and dwelt upon them till they stabbed and pricked and stung me to a madness of passion and loathing.

We reached the little village in good time, and halted at the trysting spot to wait for news from Zoiloff. This was so long in coming that my patience was ebbing fast, until I saw Spernow approaching at a hand gallop.

“All is arranged, Count,” he said, after I had greeted him. “You are to ride back about half a mile along the road I have come. There is no sign of any interference. But I have something for you.” He drew a small note from his pocket and handed it to me, and turned away to speak to my servant.

I opened it quickly, little guessing the contents :

“I have heard the terrible news of your quarrel with the Duke Sergius, and that you are to meet to-morrow. God preserve you from danger. I am going to ask you the hardest favour that could be put in words. I know of your skill, and of the terrible provocation you have received, but I beg you not to have his death on your soul. Think of what it must mean to us all—to me. For *him* to be killed by *you*. I pray you, for my sake.—CHRISTINA.”

I stared at the lines in a fever of distraction. At the very moment when the cup was at my lips, it was to be dashed away. Just when I had fed my passion, and had been goaded by the remembrance of the man's foul acts and insults to a vow of implacable vengeance, I was to do nothing.

I could not grant the wish. The man deserved to die, and die he should if my arm were strong enough. I could not, I would not, let him escape me. He had forced the quarrel, and it must go through. It was a just cause, and I was in the right throughout ; and I crushed the paper in my clenched hand and vowed the request was impossible.

Yet how could I face her afterwards and say, " I had your plea and would not hearken to it ! " Was ever man more plagued ? I paced up and down the turf fighting the fight between my thirst for vengeance and my love for Christina with its desire to grant her wish ; and never had I fought a harder battle.

My love won, of course. I had no motives in life but those which were inspired by my love for her ; and the thought of myself, appearing red-handed before her, and of her turning from me in abhorrence, or gazing at me with eyes of reproach to bid me never see her again since I cared so little as not to grant her wishes, was unbearable. But it was hard, cruelly hard ; and I could have ground my teeth in the stress of my keen disappointment.

I questioned Spernow as we rode together, and he told me that Mademoiselle Broumoff had given him the letter, and that it was to be destroyed as soon as read.

I tore it to shreds and scattered them on the passing wind, with a smile half bitterness, half love ; though

I would fain have kept the letter near my heart. Then I fell moody and silent. There was more in the request than Christina had foreseen. It was not unlikely to prove my death warrant. To go into a fight with so expert a swordsman as Duke Sergius was dangerous enough under any circumstances and at any time. But to fight him while bound to act only on the defensive, and to refrain, too, from taking advantage of such openings as he might give, magnified the danger many times, and must make the issue less than doubtful for me. The fight was to be to the death, or till one of us was so wounded as to be unable to continue it, and it was clear that, if I was not to attempt to wound him, it was I who must be struck down.

It was certain, too, that so expert a fencer as he would soon perceive that I was not going to press him, and thus he could fight at his ease and wait to pick out the moment when he could most easily plunge his sword into my heart.

If I escaped with my life, too, I had to suffer the humiliation of defeat at his hands; and I groaned in spirit at the bondage which my love imposed.

And yet I blessed the gentleness, little regardful of me though it was, that had inspired the plea.

When we came in sight of the others, who were already waiting for us, my mind was made up and my decision taken. The Duke should live, even if it cost me my life.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE FIGHT

As I dismounted I saluted the others and glanced sharply at the Duke, who feigned not to notice my salute, and looked away without returning it. I hoped I could detect an expression of genuine anxiety on his face, as if he did not at all relish the turn things had taken ; and purposely I assumed as dark and stern an expression as I could force into my face. Though I was debarred from killing him, I would at least act as if I meant to.

It did not take much time to select the place and complete the necessary preliminaries, and while I was making ready I drew Zoiloff aside.

"I must have a last word with you, my friend," I said earnestly. "Matters have taken a strange turn since I saw you ; I have had an urgent request from the Princess not to kill the Duke, and I don't hide from myself that I am now going probably to my death. If I am to act only on the defensive, I can't carry on the fight indefinitely, of course ; and, if I fall, I charge you on your honour to let the Princess know that my last thoughts were of her."

He saw instantly how grave the prospect was, and was more moved than I could have believed.

"We have arranged that it shall be to the death, Count. She had no right to make such a request.

Not knowing the conditions, such a request cannot, and must not, be listened to. She cannot wish your death rather than his. Women don't understand these things. You must not be bound."

"I have reasoned it out in my own way," I answered with a smile, "and I shall observe the condition."

"By Heaven, I would have had no hand in it at all had I foreseen this. But I suppose she does not wish you to be killed like a sheep, without an effort," he cried excitedly. "You can wound him, at any rate. But die you must not. We cannot spare you, Count; she cannot, she does not, know what she asks."

"When you think it over calmly you will see she is right. He must not die by my hand, things being as they are." He knew what I meant, and had no answer to it. He wrung my hand, much affected; and, after a moment, growled into his moustache:

"Hang the women; they spoil everything."

"Remember," I said, warningly, "if things go badly with me, give my message—but no reproaches. She must know nothing except that I was beaten by the Duke's superior skill. On your honour, Zoiloff?"

"On my honour," he answered; and, as I was ready, we went forward together.

The Duke eyed me with a look of hate, and it was easy to see he meant to do his worst. As our swords crossed, and we engaged, I seemed to feel the thrill of his passion, as if it were an electric current passing through the steel.

He fought well and cleverly, but he was not my match. I had been trained in a better school, and held him at bay without much difficulty. I was much cooler, too, than he; and his fiery temper made him too eager to press the fight.

He made no attempt to wound me slightly, but sought with the vindictiveness of passion to get through my guard and thrust his blade into my heart. My fighting was all defensive; and after a short time my tactics evidently puzzled him. He thought my object was to wear him down. This cooled him, and he began to fight much more warily and cautiously, and with far less waste of energy and strength.

The first point fell to me, partly by accident. Making an over-zealous thrust at my body, which I parried with some difficulty, he came upon my sword point, which just touched his body and drew blood. The seconds interfered; his wound was examined and found to be slight, and we were ordered to re-engage.

. In the second bout he changed his tactics, and again attacked me with great impetuosity. The result was what might have been expected. He gave me more than one chance which I could have taken with deadly effect; and when he saw that I did not—for he fenced well enough to understand this—I saw him smile sardonically. He might well wonder why I should wish to spare him. But each time Christina's words were before my eyes and ringing in my ears, and, bitterly though I hated him, I dared not, and would not, kill him. Then he wounded me. He thought he had found the opportunity he sought, and his eyes gleamed viciously as he lunged desperately at my heart. I parried the stroke, but not sufficiently, for I felt his sword enter my side, and for a moment I thought all was over.

But when the fight was stopped for the second time it was found that the blow had gone home too high, and had pierced the flesh above the heart, and close under the shoulder. The blood made a brave show,

but there was no danger—nothing to prevent my fighting on ; and again we had to engage.

It was now with the greatest difficulty that I could restrain myself to act only on the defensive. The triumphant gleam in his eyes when his sword found its way into my body had sent my temper up many degrees. A man of honour, having such skill of fence as he possessed, and seeing that I was making no effort to attack him, and was, indeed, actually letting pass the openings he gave, would have refused to continue a fight on such unequal terms. But he grew more murderous the longer we fought, and more than once made a deliberate use of my reluctance to wound him by exposing himself recklessly in order to try and kill me. He did it deftly and skilfully, with great caution, step by step, as if to assure himself of the fact before he relied and risked too much upon it ; but, having satisfied himself, he grew bolder every minute.

It was no better than murder ; and, strive as I would, remembering Christina's words and seeking to be loyal to her, I could not stop my rising temper nor check the rapidly growing desire to punish him for his abominable and cowardly tactics. As the intention hardened in my mind, so my fighting changed. My touch grew firmer, more aggressive ; I began to press him in my turn, and to show him the dangers that he ran. He read the thought by that subtle instinct which all swordsmen know, and, as my face grew harder and my eyes shone with a more deadly light, I saw him wince, and noted the shadow of fear come creeping over his face and into his eyes. He began to fight without confidence and nervously, dropping the attack and standing like a man at bay.

I pressed him harder and harder, my blood growing

ever more and more heated with the excitement of the fight ; Christina's words were forgotten ; and springing up again in my breast came that deadly resolve of the previous night to kill him. He read it in my face instantly, and it drove him to make one or two desperate and spasmodic attempts to get at me ; though I noticed with a grim smile that now he was cautious not to expose himself as before.

I defeated his attempts without difficulty, and was even in the act of looking out for an opening to strike, when the remembrance of my pledge, and of what my love would say to me if I killed him, shot back into my mind, and at a stroke killed all the desire to kill. The change of mood must in some way have affected my fighting, as we know it will, for I left myself badly guarded, and like a dart of lightning his blade came flashing at me.

I was wounded again ; but, fortunately, malice, or fear, or too great glee, made him over-confident, so that his aim was awry, and, instead of piercing my heart, his sword glanced off my ribs, inflicting another flesh wound, but barely more than skin deep.

"This can't go on," growled Zoiloff in my ear, during the pause. "You could have killed him half a dozen times. We shall be here all day." The absurd bathos of the speech made me smile, despite the grim situation, and the smile was still lurking on my face when we crossed swords for the fourth time. A glance at my opponent's face was enough to kill any smile, however ; and almost as soon as our blades touched he commenced again to force the fight as though he meant to finish it off quickly. So vehement was his attack, that for a while I needed all my nerve and skill to defend myself ; but I contented myself with defen-



"I RAN MY SWORD THROUGH HIS NECK."—Page 199.

THE
END

sive tactics—for the interval had cooled my temper—until, by a little dastardly, unswordsmanlike trick, he tried to catch me at a disadvantage. In an instant my passion flamed up beyond restraint, and before there was time for me to regain control of my temper, an opening came in his guard, and, unable to stay the fighting instinct to take advantage of it, I ran my sword through his neck.

The blood came gushing out in a full crimson stream from the wound and through his parted lips, dyeing his shirt front ; he staggered back, his sword dropped from his nerveless grasp, and he fell to the ground with a groan.

I looked on more than a little aghast at my work. If he should die ! And at the thought the picture of Christina's face as she would meet me flashed before my eyes, and for the moment I would have given all I was worth to have called back that laggard thrust.

Zoiloff and Spernow came and stood by me, as I waited, sword in hand, to know if the fierce combat was to go on still further. Then his chief second crossed to us, and in a formal tone said :

“ My principal can fight no longer.”

“ Is the hurt dangerous ? Will he die ? ” I asked, and the man glanced at me in evident surprise at the concern in my tone.

“ Not necessarily. The wound is severe, but the doctor says the artery has not been touched.” Then after a pause he added, as if in involuntary compliment to the skill I had shown : “ It is surprising that the fight lasted so long, Count Benderoff. I can bear witness that he owes his life to your forbearance.” And with a bow as formal as his tone he went back to the others.

"We may go," said Zoiloff; and I handed him my sword and then dressed.

"I am glad you wounded him. I feared you were going to let him kill you. He tried his utmost, and you had one very narrow escape," said Zoiloff. "But now, where are we to go?"

"I should like first to make quite certain about the nature of his wound. Will you question the surgeon yourself? Spernow and I will wait by the horses."

"What of your own wounds? Won't you have them dressed? Better run no risks."

I had almost forgotten them in my excitement, but I agreed; and as soon as the surgeon could be spared from his attendance on the Duke he came and dressed them rapidly. The one was a mere scratch, and the other not by any means serious. I had been lucky indeed to escape so lightly. "A couple of days' rest for the arm would be enough," declared the doctor, who was inclined to be garrulous about the affair until he found that I made no response.

When he had finished with me, however, I questioned him as to my opponent's condition. He gave me a learned and technical description of the exact character of the injury, and then in simple and intelligent language told me that in all probability, if the wound healed as it should, the Duke would be a prisoner to his room for two or three weeks; if it healed badly, it might be as many months. But he put his estimate at not more than a month.

"There is no danger of his death?" I asked.

"Not the least, unless he is imprudent. In a month's time he should be quite able to fight another duel should he feel so disposed."

I saw no wit in so grim a pleasantry, for he intended

it as such, and turned away with a hasty word of thanks for his attention.

"Where to?" asked Zoiloff when we were mounted.

"Back to Sofia," I answered promptly. "I am going straight to General Kolfort to ascertain the meaning of last night's attempt on me;" and I clapped my heels into my horse's flanks and started at a sharp pace for the city.

CHAPTER XIX

MY ARREST

I HAD not ridden more than a couple of miles towards the city when a thought occurred to me and caused me to draw rein suddenly and call to my companions to halt.

"Anything wrong?" asked Zoiloff, looking about him anxiously.

"It has just occurred to me that, as I'm going to put my head in the lion's mouth by going to General Kolfort, I had better not go unprepared, and I have just thought of a precaution I can take."

"What is it?"

"I can't at present explain to you fully, but you or Spernow can help me. I must find some place before I enter Sofia where I can write for an hour or two. Where can I go?"

He thought a moment, and said:

"The safest place would be back to where you passed the night. I am sure of those people, and they know how to hold their tongues;" and, changing our direction, we set off for the house at a brisk trot.

My intention was to write out a full report now for the British Foreign Office, giving a detailed account of the position of matters in regard to the Russian scheme, of the part I had played in it, and of what I believed to be the Russian designs against me. I did not forget the condition that if I failed the Foreign

Office were to be at liberty to disown me, and that the whole and sole responsibility of my present action lay with me, let the consequences be what they might. But I calculated that so far I had kept aloof from committing the Government in any way, and could thus claim the protection of the Foreign Office should any personal violence be contemplated by old Kolfort.

I thought out carefully what I had to say, and when we arrived at the house set to work with a will. I gave a clear description of the Princess's counterplot, and then added my reason for believing that, although it was likely to fail now, it could yet be used for the advantage of Bulgaria and the Balkan States generally. The Prince had decided to abdicate, and if measures could be taken from Downing Street to have a successor to him ready, whether that successor should be Princess Christina or another, and the abdication so timed as to fit in with such a plan, it would be perfectly feasible to checkmate the Russian move. My own opinion, I declared, was in favour of putting the Princess on the throne, thus apparently acting in co-operation and concert with Russia, while at the same time taking secret measures to prevent any marriage on her part with a Russian ally.

For myself, I asked merely that, in the event of my being imprisoned by General Kolfort, the British representative in Bulgaria might be instructed by telegraph to press either for my being liberated or brought to trial. No more to be done than would be done in the case of an ordinary British subject.

When I had completed the despatch, I drafted a telegram announcing that it was on its way, and I instructed my companions how they were to act. Spornow was to take the work in hand, and to push on

now for the Servian frontier, and take the train there for Nish, where I knew there was a particularly energetic British Consul. If no communication reached Spernow from me within twenty-four hours of his arrival at Nish he was to send off the despatch by the quickest available means, and twenty-four hours later—so as to allow enough time to elapse to prevent the letter being intercepted—the telegram was to follow. Then Spernow was to return in hot haste to Sofia to report to Zoiloff. He undertook the commission very readily, asking only that Mademoiselle Broumoff should be told of the reason for his absence, and that Zoiloff should arrange the difficulties of getting him leave of absence from his regiment.

Zoiloff and I then resumed our ride to Sofia, discussing very earnestly the new development of our affairs and the possibilities which lay ahead of my interview with the General.

I scarcely thought he would venture to imprison me, resolute and ruthless as he was in pressing his policy; and I said as much to Zoiloff, who was, however, more doubtful.

"In any case it must make no difference to our scheme," I said. "You must push on without me, and hurry forward all the preparations with the utmost despatch. I should like you to see the Princess and explain to her precisely what has happened this morning, although you need know nothing of her message to me."

"I understand," he said drily; "but I should like to warn her against imperilling a valuable life when she doesn't know the facts. It may be my turn next—who knows?"

"You would act as I did, my friend," I replied, smiling; "I know you."

"Well, the conditions would never be the same," he said bluntly; and I did not pursue the point any further.

When we reached Sofia we parted.

"How shall I know what happens at the General's?" he asked.

"If you do not hear from me, you may draw your own conclusion that I am on my way to Tirnova. If we are not to meet again—good-bye;" and I held out my hand.

He grasped it warmly, and with a ring of true stalwart friendship he said: "If they shut you up it'll go hard with me if I don't find you. And if they kill you you have my oath on it you sha'n't go unavenged, if I have to shoot that infernal old ruffian with my own hand. It shall be life for life." And without another word, as though he did not wish me to see how much he was moved, he clapped his heels into his horse's flanks and cantered off.

I avoided my own house purposely, lest some of the General's agents should be waiting there for me, for I wished it to be unmistakably clear that my interview with the General was by my own choice; and I did not draw rein till I had reached the courtyard of his house. Then, telling Markov to wait for me with the horses in the street, I entered the house and asked for General Kolfort.

I could see that my visit caused surprise, and observed that one or two of the soldiers present made haste to post themselves so that my retreat would be impossible. I was shown upstairs into the room where I had first seen the General, and where, as usual, one or two officers were lounging. I was kept there about half an hour—quite long enough to irritate me—and

then a messenger ushered me into the General's room.

He looked even harder and grimmer and sterner than ever as he glanced up from his desk and fixed his eyes on me.

"What is your business with me?" he asked curtly.

"That is the question I have come to put to you," I retorted, quite as shortly.

"Why to me?"

"Because I have heard, not quite incidentally, that you have been sending to my house to inquire for me."

"You appear to have been called away suddenly."

"Driven away, I should say rather," I retorted. "May I ask why you have dared to make such an attempt?"

"Dared?" he returned, with a flash of his eyes at the word.

"Dared," I repeated.

"I am not answerable to you for the steps taken in the exigencies of State."

"Exigencies of State you term it. A singular name to describe an act which in plain terms means that when one of your chief men has forced a quarrel on me and challenged me, you would shut me up to prevent our meeting, so that he might have an opportunity of branding me as a coward."

"I do not think you a coward," he answered slowly.

"Nor does your Duke Sergius now," said I.

This touched him, for he asked with evident interest: "What has happened this morning? A good deal may turn on your answer."

"He is not dead, if that's what you mean—only badly wounded;" and I gave him a brief description of the fight. He listened closely, but without a sign of his feelings on his face.

"You seem to suggest that you could have killed him," he said with half a sneer.

"His own second said as much to me, and offered to bear witness to the fact that he owed his life to my forbearance."

"A very tactful forbearance. And why did you spare him? From what I hear, there is little love lost between you—at least, in the common sense of the term," he added drily.

"I had my reasons, and they are my own, if you please. But now will you tell me the reason for your conduct?"

"I do not consider it safe for you to be any longer at large."

The answer was given deliberately, and after a pause. It showed that his intention was to imprison me; but I would not let him see the unpleasant effect of the decision. I smiled and shrugged my shoulders.

"And your reasons?" I asked.

"I am not accustomed to discuss reasons with prisoners."

"Yet you will have to state them in my case. Englishmen can't be packed away like herrings in a barrel to suit even your convenience."

"You are no Englishman, Count Benderoff."

"On the contrary, I am a British subject, General Kolfort, and am resolved to claim my rights as one."

He waved the words aside as though they were of no account.

"I warned you when you first came here——"

"When you lured me here, you mean," I corrected.

"That you would have to choose in which character I was to deal with you. Had you chosen then to stand

on your British nationality—which, by the way, I question entirely—I should have known how to deal with you. Instead of dealing frankly with me, you chose to remain in Sofia, mixing yourself up with intrigues against me, and doing other ridiculous things, until I repeat I cannot any longer allow you to remain at large. I shall send you to Tirnova, that you may have time to cool your inconvenient passions and clear your head."

"Very well, I am content to go. It will be an excellent illustration for the guidance of Europe as to Russian policy in the Balkans."

"When Europe hears of it," he returned significantly.

I blessed my prudence as I thought of the despatch I had sent by Spernow, and at the thought a smile flitted across my face. He stared at me in some doubt, not understanding my confidence.

"I am afraid you think I am only a short-sighted fool, after all, General."

"I have not formed a very high opinion of your foresight. I know you to be brave and hold you to be clever in your way; but a little longer foresight would have shown you that such an ending as this was inevitable when you decided to meddle with politics here and to act as my secret opponent."

I began to wonder how much he knew of our plans.

"I did not so lack foresight as to come to this meeting unprepared, at any rate," said I, significantly. "And if you throw me into one of your confounded prisons, the news will soon be buzzing in every Foreign Office in Europe that Englishmen must be deprived of their liberty in order to prove Russia's devotion to the cause of freedom in the Balkans." I threw the words at him recklessly, and all his self-restraint could not help his

showing that the blow went home. He had not expected this.

"I don't believe you," he said bluntly.

"So much the worse for you; but if you were a younger man, General Kolfort, you would not dare to say that to my face," I added, sternly.

"You will find it no easy task to get your news out of Bulgaria."

"If I had not known it was already safe across the frontier, do you think I should have been fool enough to come here;" and I laughed and shrugged my shoulders, enjoying his embarrassment. Then I pushed my advantage. "But now, I am ready for your men. Where are you sending me? Tirnova?" And I got up as though the prison were immaterial to me.

He didn't relish the piece of bluff, and sat silent and uneasy.

"You can sit down again," he said after a pause.

I threw myself carelessly into my chair again, crossed my legs, glanced at my watch and said, lightly:

"Tirnova's over a hundred and twenty miles as the crow flies, and if you have any regard for my health—which, by the way, may be an important matter to you by and by—we'd better make a start. I'm wounded, and a long journey might have a very bad effect upon me."

He threw me a glance of baffled rage; I saw his lips move, and guessed that a pretty little oath had slipped out into his moustache unchristened.

"If you mean to brave me out, your journey may be a much farther and a much quicker one," he said after a pause. "Mistakes have been made before now, and explained afterwards."

"Mistake and murder are both spelt with an M," I

said recklessly. "But a murdered Englishman is not by any means easy to explain away."

A long tense silence followed. He broke it by asking abruptly, seeking to catch me unawares:

"What's this I hear about your love for the Princess Christina?"

"How on earth can I know what your spies or my enemies tell you?" I replied, not for a moment off my guard.

"Do you dream of making her your wife?"

"Hasn't she promised to marry the Duke Sergius?"

"Is it true that you love her?"

"If it were you are scarcely the man to whom I should bring such a confidence."

"What's your object here in Sofia?"

"To be allowed to mind my own business."

"What is that business, as you call it?"

"My own concern," I retorted as sharply as I could rap out the words. It was as clear as daylight that I had touched him with my threat, or he would never continue to question me. I was winning.

"What does your Government want?" he asked, after a pause to recover from his chagrin at my former replies.

"How should I know—except to have their subjects left unmolested?" I was determined to rub this in, and I could see he relished this last rub no better than the first.

"If you refuse to answer my questions you leave me but one alternative," he threatened.

"Take it," I answered lightly. "You take it, of course, with your eyes open."

"You have been engaged in a conspiracy against the Russian influence?"

"I have been engaged in that conspiracy carried on in the name of a Woman, if that's what you mean. And, as you are perfectly aware, with not only your consent, but approval and encouragement."

"You have been working secretly for another object," he cried angrily.

"Are you accusing the Princess Christina of treachery?"

"Your tongue is as skilful in fence as your sword," he said, smiling grimly. "But you know my meaning perfectly."

"Then pack me off to Tirnova—if you think you have proof to prove the unprovable; and at the same time show your hand to the rest of Europe. No, no, General Kolfort," I said, smiling and shaking my head, as though the thing were no more than a jest, "that cock won't fight, and you know it."

"I regard you and could deal with you as a renegade Bulgarian officer conspiring against your Prince; a crime that merits imprisonment."

"Very good and plausible, no doubt—were it not for the precaution that I have taken to let people in London know differently. But if that's to be your line, we shall have the gaols pretty full here, and you and I, General, will be able to resume our interesting conferences, hobnobbing in one of them on more equal terms than here;" and I wagged my head at him again.

The taunt enraged him. His eyes flashed fire, and a flush of wrath tinged his dried, wrinkled, parchment cheeks. He sprang to his feet and sounded the bell on his table furiously.

"I will put your devil-may-care humour to the test. You shall go to Tirnova."

"As you please," I answered, surprised now in my

turn, for I had not thought he would dare to push matters to extremes. "I will tell you one thing My arrest will be the signal for that despatch to be forwarded. If I do not go to Timova, that will not go to London."

"I care nothing for your Government," he exclaimed, all self-control gone in his anger. "They dare do nothing, even if they would."

At that moment an officer entered in response to the bell.

"Arrest the Count Benderoff," cried the General, pointing at me a finger that trembled with rage. "Give up your sword, sir. You are a traitor, unworthy to bear it."

"I shall do nothing of the kind," I said desperately. "The man who lays a hand on me may look to himself."

"Call in your men, Captain. If he resists, shoot him," said the stern old man grimly, and in the moments of waiting we looked at each other in silent defiance. Then came the tramp of men and the clash of arms in the room without, and a file of soldiers marched in.

"I must ask you for your sword, Count Benderoff," said the officer, quietly and courteously. "You will see resistance is useless."

For a moment I still resisted and refused.

"I beg you to save trouble," he said again.

"I will not," I cried furiously. "If I am to be murdered, it shall be done here, in the presence of my murderer;" and I set my back to the wall and whipped out my sword.

"Shoot him down!" shouted the infuriated old man to the soldiers, who levelled their guns dead at me. "Now, will you give up your sword?"

"No, I'll die first, you butcher!" I exclaimed, setting my teeth.

"Do your duty, Captain," said the inflexible old martinet.

"Count Benderoff, let me make another request," he said, daring even the General's displeasure in his reluctance to give the command.

"No; you shall butcher me here."

A moment of terrible strain followed, and then in the room without the sounds of some confusion were heard, and an exclamation of surprise from one or two of the men there. Quick, light steps fled across to the room where we stood.

"Shut that door," cried the General.

But the order was too late, and the Princess Christina came rushing in, her face deathly white with alarm at what she saw, while with the quickness of thought she placed herself between me and the soldiers who covered me with their muskets.

CHAPTER XX

A WARNING

THE Princess looked magnificent in the fire of anger which succeeded her alarm, as she turned to the old Kolfort for an explanation.

"I presume you will scarcely order your soldiers to shoot me," she said, facing him grandly, her eyes flashing.

I slipped my sword back into its scabbard, and the General made a peremptory sign to the Captain to withdraw his men.

We waited in silence while the order was given, and the men filed out, followed by the Captain.

"Remain in the ante-room," said the General.

"You mistake me greatly, General Kolfort, if you think your soldiers will be needed for work like this," cried the Princess. "Pray what is the explanation of what I saw when I arrived?"

I thought I could best give that, and said:

"General Kolfort had arrested me, and when I refused to give up my sword had ordered these men of his to shoot me."

"Is this possible?" she cried, her indignation flaming in her face. "And yet of course it is. I have heard within the last few minutes of what was done last night and of this visit of yours, Count Benderoff, and I hurried here, fearing mischief. Thank Heaven, I arrived in time; but I did not dream such an infamous act would ever be attempted."

"Infamous is a strong word, Princess," said Kolfort sternly.

"I use it because I can find no stronger," was the quick, spirited retort. "By what right, and in whose name, do you contemplate such an outrage?"

"The General declared that I was a renegade officer plotting against the reigning Prince, and that I therefore deserved imprisonment in the fortress of Tirnova. The General himself being, of course, so zealous a loyalist, the thought that anyone should so conspire was naturally repugnant to him."

I threw as much irony into my tone as I could, and ended with an intentionally aggravating and somewhat insolent sneer. I wished to put as ugly a complexion as possible on his conduct.

"The matter is one which you and I had better discuss in private, Princess," said the old man, who was now fast recovering his habitual self-restraint.

"Why in private?"

"Because I prefer it, Princess."

"I see no reason. The Count is fully aware of all our matters, is one of my most trusted advisers and friends, and his welfare and safety touch me very closely. The matter can be settled here and now."

"You are presuming much——"

"I do not understand the word presumption in such a case, and from you, General Kolfort," cried Christina, proudly, "and I will not hear it."

"If your Highness has no further need of my services, nor of the influence of my Government in your affairs, you have but to say so," he said in a tone of calculated menace. But he didn't frighten my brave and staunch Princess, and she answered him in a tone of queenly dignity.

"If your services can go no higher than the cold-blooded murder of my friends and adherents, I shall be glad for your Government to release you from a position that you fill in a manner so unworthy of Russia and so bitterly hateful to myself."

He had drawn a blank in the attempt to intimidate her, and was quick to see and wily enough to abandon it.

"Yet I have not been unmindful hitherto of your interests," he answered.

"Hitherto they do not appear to have clashed with your own plans and private animosities," she flashed, with a sting that festered at once.

"This is rather a matter of your private feelings than mine," he said, with a significant glance in my direction.

"I will not affect to misunderstand you," she answered readily, with mounting colour. "Our interview yesterday makes that unnecessary. That, as I read it, is the real reason at the bottom of this last act of yours. I gave my word then to marry the Duke Sergius, and I would have kept it at all hazards. But I did not mean, and will not suffer, that my marriage with the Duke should be the death-sentence upon Count Benderoff."

"You 'would have kept' your word. Do you mean——?" He paused; and how I hung upon her reply may be imagined.

"I mean that, as the Duke has involved himself in a quarrel, and been seriously wounded for his pains, I cannot well become his wife the day after to-morrow."

"There must be no delay," he retorted quickly.

"Delay!" she cried, her eyes flashing again brilliantly. "Do you think if you had murdered my

friend here, or if you dared to thrust him into a prison, that I would ever make a marriage that at the best must be hateful to me?"

"This friendship of yours threatens to be exceedingly inconvenient; and if you mean to allow it to interfere with urgent matters of State, we may as well abandon all our plans, or look for some other means of carrying them out."

"If a policy of murder is your only alternative, I agree with you," she exclaimed, taking up his challenge instantly. "I will not have the steps of my throne running with blood shed by Russia."

He bit his lip in chagrin and manifest embarrassment.

He might well be embarrassed. He had fired his two big guns—a threat first to withdraw from her cause and then to throw her over—and had found them both burst at the breech. A long pause followed, in which I watched his face closely. He appeared to come suddenly to a fresh decision, and changed his manner accordingly.

"Well, I am sorry to have distressed you, Princess. What is it you wish?"

"I will not have Count Benderoff, or any of my friends, subjected to interference at the hands of your agents. Their personal freedom and safety are my special charge."

"The Count is at liberty to leave," he replied on the instant, in his more customary curt, decisive tone. "And I trust his future actions will not bring him again in conflict with me. He may take this as a warning."

"I have done nothing in this case, and need no warning," I said warmly. "If you allege anything

against me, I am prepared to take the consequences, and demand to stand my trial."

"This is no occasion that calls for mock heroics," he sneered. "In my opinion you should be in Tirnova; but the Princess has thought well to interfere in your behalf, and I bow to her wishes—for the present. That is all."

"For the second time I owe my safety, and probably my life, to you, Princess," I said, advancing to her. "I have no words to thank you."

"If you wish to show your thanks you had better stop that despatch you told me of," interposed the General, not without a note of concern in his voice.

"There is no need for it if I am to remain at liberty," I answered, half disposed to smile.

"I am ashamed there should have been this need for my interference, Count," said the Princess, looking at me and smiling.

"I trust that there may come a chance for me to prove my gratitude," I replied, scarce daring to meet her eyes; and with that I withdrew.

As I passed through the ante-chamber I was stopped by the Captain, whose men remained there on guard.

"I hope I am to let you pass, Count," he said most courteously.

"General Kolfort has this moment said I am at liberty to go."

"You know how strict our discipline is. Will you wait while, as a matter of form, I obtain his confirmation?"

"Most willingly," I asserted. He went to the General's room, and in a moment returned smiling and holding out his hand.

"I am delighted. I know of you, of course, and,

believe me, I have never passed through a more embarrassing minute in my life than that in his room." His manner was so unaffectedly frank and friendly that I shook his hand cordially, and he came with me down the stairs and out into the street.

"I heard an account of last night's proceedings from one who was at Metzler's house, Count; I hope you do not judge us all by such an instance. I have just heard also what occurred this morning;" and in his tone and manner he contrived to convey a genuine compliment to my skill. "The Duke is well punished."

"I shall be glad to hear how he progresses," I said, as my man brought my horse up.

"I hear that you have an excellent shooting gallery at your house, and that you are a remarkable shot."

"Will you care to come and see it?"

"Immensely, and perhaps to try the foils with you;" and his face lighted as though I were granting him a great favour when I asked him to dine with me. I rode off, thankful indeed that I was still free, speculating whether I could in some way attach this Russian to me; and, what was still more important, wondering what lay behind the sudden change in old Kolfort's manner, and whether he was concocting some further subtle plan against me.

Before I reached my house I had resolved on an important step, as the result of these later developments. After I had sent to Zoiloff to let him know what had happened, I wrote a fresh despatch to send to London, embodying much of what I had before written, and giving a brief description of my treatment at the General's hands. I urged at greater length and with more insistence the desirability of steps being taken immediately on the lines I had suggested, de-

claring that there was necessity for immediate action ; that I believed a complete change of front was contemplated by General Kolfort ; that the Foreign Office must be prepared instantly with a successor to the reigning Prince—otherwise a *coup d'état* would be carried out, which I was convinced would result in Russia being left the complete master of the position ; and that the one key to the situation would be found in timing the Prince's abdication with the finding of a successor who would not be Russia's tool. And I declared strongly in favour of the Princess Christina.

As soon as I had finished it I sent for my servant Markov, who had been away with me the previous night, and explained to him that he was to carry it to Nish, and place it in the hands of the British consul there, and at the same time deliver a letter, which I wrote to Lieutenant Spernow. This note was to tell him to destroy the first despatch.

"When you leave Nish," I added, explaining the next step, "you will return to the frontier by train, and from there to Sofia you must organize relays of horses at distances of from ten to twelve miles, avoiding the main road where possible, so that at any moment I can make sure of a quick, clear journey from here to the frontier. Spare no money in the effort to do the work well and quickly. You must have it complete in four days at the outside, three if possible. Choose your agents with great care, and give no hint for whom the work is being done. If questions are pressed, you can say it is in connection with a wager between Russian officers. I trust you implicitly, Markov," I concluded. "And if you serve me well I will give you such a reward as will make you independent for life."

He assured me earnestly of his attachment to me, and said that, as he came from that part of the country, he knew just the people who would do what was needed. Then he added a characteristically Bulgarian touch: "They know me well in those parts, Count, and they hope that some day I shall settle among them. I am looking forward to being able to buy a small farm that I know of there, and marry." I took the hint.

"Do this for me well, and I will buy the farm for you."

"My lord is generosity itself!" cried the fellow, his face radiant with glee, and I knew I could depend upon a man of his kind when his personal feelings and self-interest were running in double harness.

My object was, of course, to prepare the means of flight should that become at any moment imperative; and such a contingency grew more probable the more closely I reflected upon what had passed at my interview with the General. And I explained my views to Zoiloff, who came hurrying to me on the receipt of my letter, and told him what I had done.

The Russian officer, Captain Wolasky, dined with me, and we spent an hour together in the shooting gallery. I did my utmost to create a favourable impression upon him, and appeared to be very successful; for he expressed a warm wish that we might see more of one another, and we parted on particularly friendly terms. I was careful, of course, to avoid any reference to political matters; but he himself let fall enough to show me that his work in Sofia was exceedingly distasteful, and that he had little sympathy with Kolfort's policy, and none at all with his methods.

"Russia must, of course, dominate the Balkans;

that is the law of Nature," he said once; "but I detest a roundabout way of going to a mark when a straight road could be cut with ease. That's old Kolfort's way, however. He's just like a man grubbing in a cellar for coals, and will insist on having every little bit of rubbish through his fingers and storing and binning it for future use, as if he expected the day to come when rubbish would be worth more than coal, whereas one vigorous use of the shovel would give him all the coal he wants at once.

I was far from displeased to find him out of conceit with the General, but said nothing.

"What could have been more abominable and disgusting than his treatment of you to-day?" he exclaimed, when my wine had begun to heat him. "It's that sort of barbarism that brings us Russians into such ill-repute. I know what would have happened. He would have given that order to shoot you without turning a hair and then would have drawn up some bogus report or other about you having made a desperate attack upon his life, and have called upon me to witness it. I suppose he hates you for some reason, and that's at the bottom of it. There are plenty of black pages in his past, I can tell you."

"You had better not," I answered, smiling. I did not wish him to have the after-reflection that he had been talking too freely. If he were inclined to give me his confidence he should not lack opportunities; and I pressed him warmly, therefore, to come and see me frequently.

He came the next day when Zoiloff was with me, and again on the following day, when Spernow had returned, and we encouraged his intimacy in every possible way. Zoiloff, in the meantime, had made guarded

Inquiries about him, having at first been disposed to distrust him as a possible spy acting in General Kolfort's interest. He had found out that he was as genuine as he seemed—a man with no family influence to push his interests, of no means of his own, and constantly standing in his own light because of his scruples, and a blunt, rugged way of expressing them.

"A man not to be bought, but to be won," declared Zoiloff. "And, once won, to be trusted. He may be valuable to us;" and so indeed the event proved.

On the occasion of his fourth visit I noticed that he was reserved and seemed preoccupied, and while we were all going through our practice in the gallery he joined in it with small zest. We three were even more jubilant than usual. We had been pushing forward our preparations with the greatest energy and activity, and Zoiloff had declared to me his belief that in another ten days or a fortnight we might venture to make the *coup* towards which all our efforts were bent. Men had been sounded in all directions, and fresh adherents had come in in large numbers, and with great enthusiasm.

I myself had not seen the Princess since the memorable interview at the General's house; but she knew of all that we were doing. The marriage had been rendered impossible for the moment because the Duke's wound had taken a turn for the worse, and he lay battling almost for life. We had had no hint that our suspicions of a change of front on Kolfort's part had any foundation; and our hopes ran high therefore that, after all, we should yet carry things through with a dash.

When our fencing was over, I observed that Captain Wolasky hung about as if waiting for Zoiloff and

Spernow to go; and I dropped them a hint quietly that they had better do so.

As soon as we were alone, the Captain said:

"I am afraid this may be my last visit, Count."

"Oh no, I hope not. Why?"

"You will not betray my confidence, I am sure. I have received a hint that my coming here is not acceptable to those in authority—to old Kolfort that means, of course."

"Believe me, I am genuinely sorry. It cuts short what I hoped would be a pleasant friendship." I spoke in all sincerity, for I liked him. "But I can understand your position."

"That is not all," he added, and then hesitated and paused. I waited anxiously. "Of course I ought not to say anything to you, but you have been so exceedingly friendly. You may have heard that strange developments are on foot?"

"No, I have heard nothing." I began to take alarm.

"I am, of course, precluded from telling you their nature; but I should ill return your hospitality if I were not to give you a word of warning. You may prepare yourself for a startling change, likely to involve very serious consequences to you personally—if you remain in Sofia;" and his look said more than his words.

"You mean, I am in some danger?"

"Very grave danger, Count, and not you only."

"I may not ask you whom you mean?"

"No, I am afraid not. But there is one person in whom report says you take a deep interest. I beg your pardon for even referring to such a matter. But the danger is very grave and—well, the frontier is very

near, and not yet closed. I can say no more, and, indeed, I am sure I need not."

"You have acted the part of a true friend, Captain. How long will the frontier be open? May I ask that?"

"Yes, I am expecting orders at any moment to guard a certain line of it, and the cordon will be very securely drawn."

This was news indeed, and for long after he had left me I sat brooding over it deep in thought. I was right after all, it seemed; and the cunning old Russian spider had woven a fresh web.

CHAPTER XXI

FIGHT OR FLIGHT?

WITH the following day came startling confirmation of Captain Wolasky's warning. While I was with the regiment a letter was brought to me from the Prince requesting me to wait upon him.

I found him labouring under considerable excitement, pacing the floor restlessly and awaiting me impatiently.

"I thought you were never coming, Count," he said, irritably. "There seems to be no one now on whom I can rely."

"I came the instant I received your command, your Highness."

"Then there must have been some strange delay in giving my message. I cannot understand it."

"Is there anything in which I can serve you?"

"I wish to Heaven you could get me out of this wretched kingdom honourably. That would serve me." The words burst from him in obedience to an irresistible impulse. "I am sick and weary to death of it all;" and he continued his restless pacing for three lengths of the room. He stopped abruptly and threw himself into a chair close to me.

"Sit here," he cried, pointing to the chair next him. "I want to speak frankly to you." He paused again, and then laying his hand on my arm said very ear-

nestly : " My friend, you are playing a deadly game—and, mark me, you are going to be defeated."

" Your Highness means——?" I asked steadily.

" That your ideal is magnificent and worthy of you, full worthy of any Englishman—but impossible."

" I am flattered to hear such words from you," I replied cautiously, but he caught me up and answered sharply :

" For Heaven's sake, Count, don't answer me with any courtly phrasings that come tripping off the lips and mean nothing when spoken. I don't ask you for your confidence, unless you care to give it to me. I'll tell you what I know about you first."

" The Countess Bokara has no doubt——"

" Yes, of course she has; she has told me all she knows, or guesses, or suspects, or whatever it may be. But while it was only what she said I did not think of seeing you or interfering with you. But I have learnt it now from another source—one vastly more important. And that's what I mean when I tell you that you are steering straight for the rocks and are dead certain to be shipwrecked. Listen to me. You are in love with the Princess, and naturally enough people credit you with the intention of trying to climb into the throne by——"

" It is monstrous," I cried, unable to keep silent.

" I hope your repudiation comes from your heart—I hope it for your own sake; for there is no happiness under such a crown as I wear, Count Benderoff," said the Prince bitterly. " Men think of the dazzle, the pomp, and the grandeur, the magnificence, and forget the dangers, the cares, the awful loneliness. If you seek happiness, seek it not in the glitter of a king's garb, but in the frank enjoyment of true manliness.

A monarch has mighty opportunities of making others happy, but himself is doomed to sorrow and solitude. There is no solitude that this life can know half so awful in its depression as that which hedges a king. You seek advice, you find intrigue ; you hunger for the truth, and they feed you with the bitter apples of flattery ; you yearn for the sweet counsel of a friend, and you meet the tempered phrasings of a courtier. Your every word is weighed in the balance of your hearer's self-interest, your every thought is caught still-born and distorted, your every action is judged by the sordid standard of some intrigue, and every motive twisted and dissected, and analysed and maligned, till your very face becomes a mask to hide your mind, lest your enemies should use your looks to help the plans which their malice is spreading under your very eyes. God, it is unbearable."

I listened in silence to this outburst.

"You wonder why I speak like this to you. I can read it in your eyes—for am I not trained to find the truth in the face and hear the lies in the voice? Well, I would warn you, and more, I would warn that good, true, noble woman whom you love. Time was when I hated her, and believed all the harm that was said of her ; but now that I have learnt her real object—to act, not with, but against, the bloodsuckers who seek to devour the land—I know her goodness and sincerity. But the movement must fail. The Russians know of it, General Kolfort best of all, and he has already taken his measures to thwart you all. And you will find his hand a heavy one, Count. If the Princess Christina had succeeded in gaining the throne on her own terms—I mean by means of the men you and those with you were seeking to train as her adherents—she must still

have failed in her object, and have doomed herself to a lot as miserable and hopeless as mine has been. But Kolfort does not mean her to succeed ; and, I warn you, the measures of prevention will be sharp, sudden, and terrible in their severity."

I sat amazed and disconcerted at his words.

"You wonder how I know all this, and set it down to the Countess Bokara. Of course, she has told me ; but I have my news straight from General Kolfort himself. You little know Bulgaria or the Bulgarians, or you would have seen the consummate hopelessness of trying to avoid treachery. Every man you have added to your band has been a fresh centre of probable treachery. The rule here is each man for himself ; and some one of the men with you was bound to ask himself in time whether he could not gain more for himself by carrying the news to the Russians than by standing true to a desperate cause like your Princess's. Someone has betrayed you ; and the betrayal began when your love was known. They do not believe in disinterested love in this country, Count. The peasants may, but no one else. And when that secret leaked out, General Kolfort's task of suborning a traitor became easy enough. If I knew the scoundrel's name I would give it you, that you might cut his heart and tongue out for his cowardice. But, believe me, everything is known—everything. And your knowledge of that grim Russian leader may tell you what to expect." He spoke with all the earnestness of a troubled friend ; and I could not doubt him.

"When did your Highness learn this?" I asked after a pause.

"Yesterday. Three days ago, the General came to me with proposals that showed he had some fresh

plans in mind. He was all for my remaining here as reigning Prince, and offered to concede more than half the conditions of freedom of action I had before demanded. It was a pity to disturb the country by a change of rulers; the country was thriving under my wise rule; the people were growing more contented, and the malcontents could be overawed; the advantages of my rule were appreciated in St. Petersburg, and the basis of achieving mutual ends might probably be arranged with honour to me and substantial benefit to the country; and so on for an hour or more he prated. I asked the reason for the change of tone, and he hummed and hesitated, and, in a word, lied. I said I must have time to think; and he gave me till yesterday. Last night he came with his tale prepared—that the Princess was conspiring for an end hostile to both my aims and those of Russia; that you were her right hand and had been set on by her to fight and kill the Duke Sergius, but had succeeded only in wounding him; that your plot was to use the Russian influence to gain the throne and then yourself marry her and reign as her consort; and to gain this end you were both prepared to throw the country into the throes of a civil war which God forbend, and so on, till I was sick to death of his intriguing slanders. I tried to lure him on to tell me what he proposed for you, but he contented himself with saying he had all but completed what I might rely upon would be effectual measures of precaution.”

“May I venture to ask how your Highness answered him?”

“How should I answer him but as I have always answered? That I would never bend the knee to Russia; that I did not believe St. Petersburg would

ever sanction any such arrangement as he outlined ; and that if what he stated of the objects of the Princess were true, I would be the first to abdicate in her favour and join with her in her efforts, shouldering a musket if need be, in the ranks of the men to fight for her ; and that would I, Count, if I saw the faintest gleam of a hope of success. But there is not a chance, no jot or tittle of hope."

"Now that we have been betrayed, that is."

"Before the betrayal the chances were not one in a hundred ; now they are not one in a million. There is but one course for you and for her—flight, and at once."

"She will not desert the men who have stood by her. Nor shall I," I answered firmly.

"As you will. The Russian preparations are all but complete ; Russian troops are being hurried to the Black Sea ; the slightest sign or movement on your part will be seized on as the pretext for measures as drastic as Russian measures commonly are ; and you yourselves, you two in particular and all associated as leaders with you, will be treated you can guess how. Russia knows how to treat her friends badly enough ; but no one ever yet accused her of not dealing effectively with her enemies. You have been blind, Count ; but then a man in love is seldom anything else."

It was useless to pretend that I was not vastly affected by what the Prince told me. I read in it ruin and worse than ruin to everything, and my heart sank at the prospect before Christina.

"Your warnings, and more, the kindly motives that have prompted them, have moved me deeply, your Highness."

"They had better move you out of Bulgaria. But that is your personal affair. I have told you, because

of the service you rendered to one who is now, I regret, your enemy."

"Your Highness knows of the attempt on the Princess Christina's life," I asked.

"To my shame and sorrow, I do. She must not think that I would have countenanced such a thing for a moment," he said in tone of deep pain.

"She does not," I assured him.

"That you thwarted it is another service you have rendered me, which adds to my eagerness to help you both to safety. But even on the throne here I am powerless to help my friends. Ay, and even my friends are driven to inflict deeper wounds upon me than my enemies." His manner was that of a weak, hopeless, dejected, sorrow-broken man. "You have spoken of that deed, and I will tell you. Since I knew of it, I have refused to see the Countess. I cannot see her again; and I learn that in the mad hope of helping my fallen cause she has been in communication with Kolfort, leading him to think that I could be induced to remain here. And I declare to you, Count, I do not pass an hour, day or night, that is not care-ridden by the fear of some yet more desperate deed she may attempt—the consequences of which must fall on my head. Every step she takes adds to either my danger or my disrepute. And I can do nothing." He wrung his hands in weak unavailing despair.

I rose to leave; and, looking up half-eagerly, he asked:

"And will the British Government do nothing?" The question was so absolutely inconsequential, and suggested motives behind it so utterly at variance with his attitude and words, that I was surprised. At one moment he was declaiming against the miseries of his

position, and yet now he was clinging to the throne, like a drowning man to a spar, with a vague reasonless hope that even England would risk a war with Russia to maintain him upon it.

"I have not the remotest right to say a word on that matter, your Highness; but personally I do not think for a moment that any interference can be looked for."

"Then all is indeed lost!" he exclaimed, throwing up his hands, and sighing heavily. "Farewell, Count, let it be farewell; and do your utmost to snatch that brave girl you love from the ruin that threatens to overwhelm her."

I needed no words of his to spur me to such an effort, and as soon as I left the Palace, in grievous trouble at all that I had heard, I sent a message for Zoiloff to come to me at once, and hurried home to try and strike out some line of action to meet this most dire emergency.

My impulse was to fight—to strike our blow without a day's delay; to take the Prince at his word—if he had meant it; to get him to abdicate on the very next day, and have the Princess proclaimed ruler in his stead. Our preparations were not ready, and the *coup* would be much less effective than if we could have had time to complete everything. But then neither was General Kolfort. He had not openly abandoned Christina's cause, and might be half afraid to oppose her, if once on the throne, and without the aid of the troops which the Prince had told me were being hurried up to his support. For him to cause a civil war was to take a step in the face of Europe which might cost him dear, and force the other Powers to interfere—the one step that Russia dreaded.

Unprepared as we were, and much as we had to gain

by a few days' delay, Kolfort had much more to gain. When once his grip had tightened in the way he projected, there would not remain a vestige of hope for us. Clearly, then, if we meant to fight, we must do it at once.

It must be fight or flight.

In regard to the latter, I found Markov had returned, and he assured me he had carried out my plans to the letter—had even improved upon them, for he had told me he had arranged for the last stage of the journey to be by a very slightly known route to the frontier.

"I did this," he explained, "because I heard rumours of certain changes as to the guardianship of the frontier roads, and I thought it well to choose the route which would be the least difficult in case of trouble."

"You have done well, Markov, and have earned your reward," I said.

"You will let me stay with you to the last, my Lord?" he asked.

"I wish it above all things, for I need faithful men about me."

When Zoiloff came I explained my views, putting bluntly the alternative of fight or flight, and he was all for fighting. But he shook his head gloomily at the chances.

"We have left to the last the most hazardous work of all," he said, "and yet in some respects the most important. I mean the winning over of some of those men, the politicians, the men of tongues not deeds, whose names are most before the public. They are the most dangerous of all to meddle with, and yet without them I fear for the result. And we cannot draw them to us until we can show that the army is on our side."

“And what of the army?”

“We have done all that human effort could achieve in the time—but we could not do impossibilities. On the troops in Philippopoli I believe we can count surely. General Montkouroff is Bulgarian to the core, and where he leads the majors will follow. He has been sounded and will act with us. But here in Sofia there is not a regiment, except that to which I and Spernow belong, which would not turn against us. This disposition of the troops has all been arranged by Russia and the traitors who are Russia’s friends. The risk is tremendous.”

“There is no alternative but flight, remember.”

“And fly I will not. Come what may, we will strike.”

“If the Princess will,” said I. “We must see her at oncè.” And in this mood we started for her house, Zoiloff urging me on the way to see her alone.

“You have more influence with her than all of us put together,” he said quickly. “I will remain at hand, and you can call me in if you cannot prevail. But you are right, Count, and I am with you hand and heart. We must either strike an imperfect blow at once or abandon everything.”

CHAPTER XXII

THE HOUR OF INDECISION

MY anticipations of the interview with Christina were a mingling of pleasure and apprehension. I was longing to see her. I had not set eyes on her for four days, and, busily as the time had been filled, my thoughts had been constantly with her. I recalled, too, with a feeling of mixed tenderness and pain, how she had then said we must not meet again alone, and at the recollection my pulses thrilled again with the sad sweetness of our acknowledged but never to be avowed love.

The knowledge of her present danger moved me deeply. I had to tell her the ill news myself, and, in telling it, to urge her to take the course which I knew must put an impassable gulf between us. It had been easy enough for me, in consultation with Zoiloff, when we were both staggered by this new development, to decide for the counsel of energy and to choose the course which, while loyal to Christina, my Princess, was traitor to Christina, my love. But if she would fly the country, there would be no longer the barrier of a throne between us.

And in the minutes I was alone waiting for her coming, the thought of all I was to lose in losing her, and of all I was to gain if she would consent to flight, threatened to make a coward of me and urged me to plead with all a lover's strength that she should choose the course which would make her my wife. Away

from her I could be the impassionate adviser, but in her presence, with the light of her eyes upon my face, with my heart glowing and throbbing with the knowledge of my love for her and hers for me, it would be hard to be more than a lover, and, being that, not to set the hopes and desires of our love beyond all other consideration.

I had to wait some minutes for her; and, as they passed, the struggle grew fiercer, the temptation strengthened, and the fear of losing her waxed until I was almost impelled to call in Zoiloff to prop my stumbling resolve. There were so many arguments to favour flight. The road was still open; the means were instantly available; safety could be won in a few hours—long before this Russian tyrant could strike; the Prince had counselled, even urged it; the Russian captain had done the same; all were convinced that safety could lie in no other course.

And if we struck and failed, what outlook was there but humiliation, ill-usage, a prison, and possibly death? Love was calling to us both on that frontier road, and smiling with the promise of a life of rare delight; and here in the city stood the gaunt shadow of menacing defeat, with all its grim terrors and gloomy threats of ruthless indignity, and quenchless, loveless sorrow and separation. Is it to be wondered at that I hearkened for the moment to the whispering invitation of love, and closed my ears to aught beside?

But before she came I had fought it back, thrusting the temptation away from me as a thing dishonourable and unclean, and I rose to greet her with a heart as full of loyalty as of love. She was looking sad and troubled, and she bowed to me merely, not giving me her hand as on former visits.

"I had not thought that we should be alone again, Count Benderoff," she said, a little formally; and I hoped I could detect in this reception and in the light of her eyes when they fell upon me the sight of a personal feeling of pleasure that needed to be held firmly in check. I adopted a tone of formality that equalled her own.

"I had not forgotten your wish, Princess, but I have been compelled by grave circumstances to come to you thus. Have you heard any news? Your anxious looks suggest that you may know what I have to tell."

"I have heard nothing. Is there bad news?"

"I grieve to say it is of the worst."

"This time, at least, you are the bearer of it," she replied, smiling faintly. "And I can trust you to tell me frankly. What is it?"

I told her plainly everything. First, the warning which the Russian officer, Captain Wolasky, had given me on the previous evening; and his strong advice that she should fly before it was too late. Then, in great detail, all that had passed between the Prince and myself that morning.

She was very pale and much agitated as my narrative proceeded; but she interrupted me scarcely once, and at the close sank back in her seat, and with her hands across her eyes remained buried in thought.

"It is hard news to hear," she said despondently. "You say it spells the ruin of everything."

"It is to the full as hard for me to tell as for you to hear," I answered gently. "But it is no moment to flinch from the facts, however ugly. I fear it means the ruin of everything." At my gloomy words she shuddered, and sat for some minutes silent in dismay.

When she turned her face to me, it was so full of anguish and pain that it made my heart ache.

"How can I save those whom I have involved in this?"

"We are thinking of you, Princess," I answered.

"Oh no, no, not of me!" she exclaimed vehemently. "For myself I care nothing. Heaven knows, my motives have not been inspired by mere personal ambition. I do not crave a throne, but I have longed with a passion I cannot perhaps make you feel, to spread the blessing of freedom among the people. For this end I have striven; and now it seems I have failed. Do not think of me. I will not think of myself. But to bring others to ruin is more than I can endure. Tell me—what do you advise? What can I do?"

"There seem but two courses open," I said, and told her what Zoiloff and I had agreed together.

"You did not think that I would fly and leave those who have rallied to my cause to bear the brunt while I was seeking the coward's refuge of safety?" she asked, half indignant that I should even have suggested it.

"No, I did not," I answered quietly; "I knew you;" and her eyes thanked me for the words. "I should remind you, too, that this check has come so suddenly and prematurely for our plans that there are very few who are really involved in any danger. We have barely had time to throw off the veil of Russia's sanction of our efforts, so that there are scarcely more than a handful of us who know the real object of the scheme; and General Kolfort would be unable to bring home even to them any acts against Russia. It is he who has encouraged the plans laid "In the name of a Woman," and his own writing was in evidence to prove it. You will remember my early insistence upon the

necessity for obtaining his written sanction. In the face of that I do not see that he could produce proofs to convict anyone except our trusty Zoiloff and Spornow, and say two or three others."

"But yourself?" she cried, in a tone of quick alarm.

"I do not regard the consequences to myself as very serious, Princess," I said calmly.

"I shall not run away," she said, taking what I said as an argument in favour of her seeking her own safety, and she paused again to think. "Could I go myself to General Kolfort; give up everything on condition of his visiting it all on me? I am responsible."

It was a true woman's offer, and a noble one; but I shook my head.

"I fear it would be hopeless. He would but drag from you all that you could tell him, and then use the information remorselessly and without a scruple against those implicated. You would do the very thing you seek to avoid." Her face fell as she saw the truth of this, and she sighed heavily.

"But this alternative—what is it but a wild forlorn hope? A desperate step with scarce a chance of success? May not the consequences be a thousandfold worse than the worst that can come of doing nothing? Have you thought of what would happen if we failed? You said just now that so far only a few are openly embroiled; but should we not be forcing each man to declare himself, and would not each be marked out plainly as a target for Russian malice?"

"There is the hope of success, even if it be forlorn. There are many of us who think it better to fight and fail than not to fight at all."

"I do not like it; I am afraid of it. The chances

are so few; the risks so enormous to others. I dare not sanction it."

"We are men; the cause is a noble one; enthusiasm has spread everywhere, and a lesser spirit has ere now led a feeblar movement to success. There is not one of us, I believe, who would stand back in fear."

"There may be bloodshed," she cried.

"Much blood has already been shed in the cause of oppression. We must think of the ends, not the means. A bold stroke here will bring the army in the south to your standard—and that may do everything."

"It is a momentous decision to have to make. I cannot make it. I must have time to think."

"Every hour that delays the decision may turn the balance between success and failure."

"If I thought we could triumph!" she cried, her eyes flashing and her cheeks glowing for a moment. But she paused, the light died out as quickly as it had come, and she shook her head mournfully. "I must have time."

"Let me send for Captain Zoiloff. Hear him."

"Do you think he can persuade me where you fail, Count?" she asked, her eyes burning again, but with a different emotion.

"At least I would have you hear him, Princess," I said, dropping my eyes and speaking as evenly as I could command my voice.

While he was sent for I stood in silence, and when he came I told him briefly what had passed. He spoke strongly and bluntly like the sturdy fellow he was; but he could not prevail any more than I, and he left the room rather abruptly.

The Princess looked after him with an expression of the deepest pain, and when she turned again to me I

saw the tears standing in her eyes, and her voice was all unsteady as she cried from her heart :

“Does he think I would not do this if I dared?” And throwing herself back in her seat, she pressed her hands to her face, quite overcome with the strain of her emotions.

I waited in much embarrassment, uncertain whether to go or stay. Some moments passed in this tense silence, and then, to my surprise, she turned upon me with some indignation.

“Why did you bring him here to humiliate me like this? Does it give you pleasure to stay and witness my weakness—or what you deem weakness? Cannot you understand what I feel? Is everything to yield place to ambition, and are the dictates of humanity nothing to you? Cannot you see what I am suffering, torn in this way by the distracting doubts of such a crisis? Do you think these tears are not as hard for me to shed as the blood of others as innocent of wrong as God knows I am? Why do you plague me until I—— Oh, forgive me my wild words! I don't know what I am saying.” And she passed in a breath from indignation to lament.

“Permit me to leave you now, Princess,” I murmured.

“Would you also leave me in anger? Have I no friend staunch enough to bear with my moods, or true enough to understand me? Yes, Count Benderoff, if you wish to go the way is open to you.” And, rising, she stood erect and proud, and made me a stately bow as of dismissal. “I can decide and act alone, if need be.” Yet in the very moment of her passing indignation her lip quivered and her breath was tremulous.

“As God is my judge, I have no thought but for

you!" I cried, with a rush of passion at the sight of her trouble, and I threw myself on my knee before her. "Tell me how you wish me to act, and when I have failed reproach me with want of staunchness, but not till then."

My voice was hoarse and broken.

As I knelt I could hear the quick catches in her breath as she stood over me, and the very rustling of the trembling laces of her dress seemed to speak to me of her sufferings.

"I have wronged you, or worse—I have insulted you, Count. Ah me! I who know so well how you are indeed my friend! Do not kneel to me. It is I who should kneel to you." And at that her hand, fevered and trembling, was laid gently in mine, as if to raise me to my feet.

I kissed the fingers, the tender grace of her words of contrition almost unmaning me, and driving out all thought but of my love and my desire to comfort her. I rose, and, still holding her hand, gazed into her eyes, which shone on me through the dew of her tears in a smile of loving confidence.

"I trust you wholly," she whispered. "Help me to do right."

"If I were thinking of myself, I would urge you with every means in my power to fly," I said in low, rapid accents of passion.

"No, no, you must not counsel that," she cried vehemently. "We must not, dare not, think of ourselves. Spare me that temptation."

"You cannot stay here and be safe unless we make this desperate venture."

"And the world would say I ran away because I feared for my safety, betraying all who have sought

to help my cause; or else that I fled to——” She paused, her face aflame with sudden blushes. “You would not have me do that?”

“You are my world,” I answered recklessly. “Listen one moment. In our hearts we all know, Zoiloff as well as any, that the cause is lost. Till I fired him again—knowing how you would shrink from flight—he was saturated with hopelessness. When he heard the ill news, his one thought was how you could be saved. That is the thought of us all. The way to the frontier is still open. I have ready at instant command the means of securing your safety. If you will go, I will stay to check the slanderous tongues whose malice you dread. If you bid me I will never see you again. But for God’s sake, I implore you, leave me at least the solace that you are safe.”

The words moved her so that for a while she could not speak, but the clasp of her hand tightened on mine. Then she asked tenderly:

“Do you think the woman in me would know a moment’s happiness if you were in danger?”

“Then let it be a woman’s decision,” I urged passionately, carried away by the love in her voice. “Life is all before us.”

“No. It cannot be. Cannot. Must not,” and she shook her head and shuddered. “You know what this temptation must be to me. Do not urge it. I cannot listen. I dare not yield. I beg you be merciful,” she pleaded.

“Then fly and let me remain,” I said.

“The Princess cannot and must not go.” The words came all reluctantly, but were firmly spoken. I saw my pleading of love was to fail, and my heart sank. “But you must fly!”

"Christina!" The name slipped in protest from my lips before I thought, and I feared she would resent it ; and I felt her hand start.

"That is the hardest plea of all you have used," she said softly, with a smile of rare sweetness. "Christina is powerless to resist you, but the Princess must decide this. Do not use that plea again."

"I must—I cannot lose you," I cried desperately, "I love you so."

"Don't, please, please don't. If I dared to think of myself there would be no gladlier fugitive under Heaven's bright sky than Christina. There, I have bared my heart to you, as I never thought to open it. And by the love I know you have for me, and by the love that answers it in my heart, I entreat you help me to be strong enough to resist you. Let us never have to think that we placed our love before our duty—however hard and stern. Lend me your man's strength ; I need it so sorely." And with a little piteous action of entreaty she placed her other hand on mine, and gazed full into my eyes.

I stood fighting down my wildly roused passion, trembling under its stress like a child, till I conquered it.

"It shall be as you wish," I said at length. "We will stay and face this together. But you must not ask me again to desert you."

"There is a higher happiness than is bounded by our own wishes only," she whispered.

"I can know no sorrow deeper than my loss of you. But it shall be as my Princess desires ;" and I bent and kissed her hands again.

"The sorrow should be the lighter if divided," she whispered, with a tender reproach for the selfishness of my words.

"The thought made me a coward for the moment. And no man should be a coward whose ears have been blessed by the words which you have spoken, and the knowledge I have gained. Forgive the cowardice."

"I would I could as easily spare you the sorrow," she murmured.

"To do that now would be to rob my life of its one great happiness. Come what may for me, I shall never love again;" and with that assurance, which brought all the love in her heart in a rush of eloquent, speaking tenderness to her eyes, I left her, caring little indeed what might happen to me if our union were impossible.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN FULL CRY

THE night that followed was a memorable one in the history of Bulgaria and, as an incident of the great event, it brought the crisis in our affairs.

It was the night in which by the machinations of the Russian agents the Prince was abducted, and at the point of the pistol was forced to sign an abdication of his throne. It is not necessary for me to write about an event which has been often enough described, nor to tell how the crowd of unpatriotic and disloyal officers led their troops to surround the Palace, ordered them to fire into it, and then breaking in forced his Highness to leave, and hurried him off to Nikopolis, making him a prisoner on board his own yacht, to be landed on Russian territory.

Exactly what led up to this crisis I do not know. My opinion is that General Kolfort's offer to maintain him on the throne on certain relaxed conditions was genuine and would have been fulfilled, but at the same time the alternative plot was already in progress, and this scheme was hastened forward on the Prince's refusal of the Russian terms.

Had our own preparations but been a couple of weeks more forward the issue would have been different; but, as it was, that *coup* set the final seal on our failure.

The event took us absolutely by surprise. I had re-

tired for the night wondering what the morrow would bring forth, when my household were roused by a loud summons at the door. My first thought was that the General had again sent his men to arrest me; and I was for resisting to the utmost, when it was discovered that the summons came from Zoiloff and Spernow, who had come in hot haste to bring me the great news and to confer with me as to our actions.

The perilous nature of the crisis was obvious, and my first thought was naturally for the Princess, with a deep and bitter regret that she had not done what I had urged so strongly—used the means we had to make a dash for the frontier.

Choosing half a dozen of my servants on whom I knew I could rely implicitly, we armed them fully and set out on foot for the Princess's house. The sounds of firing from the direction of the Palace reached us as we made our way through the streets, in which the people were beginning to cluster in groups drawn by curiosity and alarm, discussing in high and excited tones the meaning of the disturbance.

No one stayed or questioned us on the way to the Princess's house, but when we reached it we halted in amazement. Every window was dark, not a light showing anywhere, while the gates and doors and forecourt were thronged with armed men.

"They've captured her!" exclaimed Zoiloff, instantly. "And we are helpless against such a crowd."

"We must know the truth," I said, my heart misgiving me. "You are best known, Spernow; go forward and try to ascertain the truth, whether the Princess has been carried away, and if so, where."

He went at once; and then Markov stepped up to me.

"I think I can find out all. I am sure to know some of the men," he said.

I sent him after Spernow, and stood back in the shadow to wait with such patience as I could command. My excitement and fear made me like a madman, till I felt I could almost have rushed single-handed against the troops and tried to hack my way into the house.

"This means devilish mischief, Count," said Zoiloff in a hushed tone. "You will be the next."

"I care nothing for myself, but I will save her," I said between my teeth.

Spernow came back in a few minutes.

"I can learn nothing. The men have orders to hold their tongues. But the Princess is not in the house; at least I gather that."

"Then why the devil do they guard it?" cried Zoiloff fiercely.

"They may be waiting for orders where to go next."

"It will be to your house, Count. You mustn't return there, but fly at once and leave us to settle this."

"When I leave you either I shall be dead or the Princess will be safe," I answered hotly. "Let us wait for Markov; he is a shrewd, cunning fellow, and may find out something."

"I am anxious about Mademoiselle Broumoff, Count," said Spernow, eager, as I could see, to get tidings of her. I sympathised with him, as well may be understood.

"Go in quest of her at once," I said; "and, when you can, return to my house, and we will thresh out some plan of action. We may have news by then."

He was off like the wind, and Zoiloff and I waited on in silence for Markov to return.

He seemed an age in coming, and I strained my eyes in trying to catch some trace of him in the crowd of moving figures that thronged the place. I gave a deep sigh of relief when at length I saw him come out of the gate, stand idly a moment glancing up and down the street, and then, as if sauntering away in obedience to the merest curiosity, cross the road to us.

"Well?" I asked eagerly.

"I have news. We had better not stay longer here, your honour," he whispered, and walked away, speaking rapidly as we walked. "The Princess Christina left here some two hours ago. She is a prisoner in the hands of General Kolfort's men. She was roused by them just before midnight and compelled to enter a carriage that was in waiting, and was driven off under a strong guard, with a considerable escort of mounted men."

"Where have they taken her?" cried Zoiloff and I, in a breath together, when he paused.

"The actual destination is not known, but the carriage started for the south road, that leading to Liublian; and one suggestion is that they will carry her to Ichtman or on to Samakovo, where there is a strong Russian detachment."

"Do you know who was with her? Was anyone?" I asked.

"Yes; Mademoiselle Broumoff was taken from home at the same time, and I believe was in the carriage with the Princess."

"Did you hear anything concerning the Count?" asked Zoiloff.

"I was asked if your honour was still at liberty, and

advised to look out for a new master. I shall not do that yet, sir, I hope," he added; "not till you tell me, at any rate."

I liked his faithfulness in choosing such a moment to assure me of his attachment.

"It may be a dangerous service for the next few hours, Markov; but you have done excellently in this—excellently."

We were now hastening back to my house, for I had already resolved to follow on the Princess's trail instantly; to rescue her at any hazard, and hurry her across the frontier, fighting our way, if need be, through all who challenged us. Zoiloff was with me heart and soul; and we set about the preparations with an energy almost feverish in its earnestness.

Fortunately I had a large stud of first-rate horses, and every man in the place who could be relied upon was armed to the teeth and mounted, and provided with enough rations to last through the coming day. I had taken care to provide myself with a large sum in gold, so as to be ready for any such emergency as the present, and this I took with me. We numbered nearly twenty men, all trained, vigorous, staunch fellows, and all zealous to the heart's-core in our cause.

When we were ready I took Zoiloff aside. I knew his resolute character and his fidelity to the Princess; but I knew also that his career lay in Bulgaria, and that if he were caught with me on such an enterprise the consequences to him would be worse than disastrous, and I did not wish to embroil him any further.

"Zoiloff, I am going to speak as a friend. No one can see the end of this business of ours. We may find ourselves face to face with the troops and may have to risk an encounter with them. For me it does not

signify. I am an Englishman and can scramble out of the mess somehow. For these men here there is no great danger either. Old Kolfort won't deal harshly with servants who can plead that I forced them into it. But with you it is all different. You are an officer, and to fight against the troops is an act of deadly treason—mutiny probably, punishable with Heaven knows what penalties. Now, as my friend, will you let me ask you to stay here and guard our interests in Sofia?"

He heard me impatiently and looked at me keenly.

"Are you serious, Count?" he asked.

"Yes, my friendship——"

"Stop, please, or I may say something I should regret, Count," he broke in, bluntly. "I should not reckon that man a friend who would urge me to be a coward. Were you any other man I would not brook it once, and even you will put a strain on our friendship if you breathe a word of this again. We are wasting time. Let us to horse. I have not deserved this of you, Count, and if I thought I had I'd shoot myself for a cur. Are you the only man that can love the Princess?"

"Forgive me, friend. I beg your pardon," I cried, vastly moved by his words; and I held out my hand.

"I am no rival of yours," he said earnestly, as he wrung it. "But if a hair of her head be injured I will know by whom, and if it does not go hard with him I am no man. Come, I am hot to be away."

As we were mounted, Spernow dashed up on horseback, pale of face and wild of manner.

"Nathalie has gone, too," he exclaimed, and I told him very briefly what we believe had occurred.

In another minute we started, riding in couples and

at some distance. Quietly, until we were clear of the town, was the order I gave ; then join, and forward in full cry. The firing had not entirely ceased at the Palace when we set out, and an occasional report reached us as we wended our way through the city by different streets to the point on the south road where we were to join. So much was now astir in the city that even our cavalcade caused little or no comment or surprise. Strange tidings and rumours were now on the wind, flying everywhere, and the excitement and confusion they spread caused our movements to pass unchallenged.

Once at the meeting-place we pricked our horses into a gallop and set out, a stern determined band dead set on revenge, and resolved every man of us to achieve the end we had at the cost of life itself.

I rode at the head, with Markov as guide ; Zoiloff and Spernow behind me, and the rest, four abreast, keeping order like a small cavalry detachment. The night was bright with moonlight, and the country lay around us everywhere still and sunk in sleep. Scarce a soul was astir in the hamlets through which our road passed, but I took the utmost precaution to prevent any mischance.

As we reached each village, I called a halt and sent Markov forward to see that all was clear, for I half expected that Kolfort would have foreseen our pursuit of Christina and have posted men to stop us. To save time we gave Markov three minutes ; and if he did not return or fire a shot to give an alarm, we clattered after him at full gallop.

So long as it was night, there was no one of whom we could make inquiries, and thus we were riding somewhat at random ; but as soon as the dawn should

begin to streak the east I knew the peasants would soon be astir, and that then we might pick up a trace or two of those we were seeking.

Then Markov made a valuable suggestion.

"Will your honour let me ride on ahead some half mile or so? We are nearing Liublian now, and if I am alone I may get news which would be refused to so large a body of us together. I may see any danger, too, and be able to warn you."

"A prudent thought, Markov," I said, bidding him ride on. "If we see you riding back to us, or if we hear you fire a shot, we shall draw rein and wait till you join us;" and with that he plunged ahead at full speed, and we watched him till he was out of sight over a rise in the road.

I told Zoiloff the arrangement, and we were discussing the situation in jerky whispers while we halted, when one of my men came galloping up in great excitement.

"My lord, we are being pursued. I had to stay behind to get a stone out of my horse's hoof, when I heard the sound of horses galloping some way behind me."

"How far behind?"

"I cannot say—the night is very still. Perhaps half a mile, or maybe a mile."

"Ride on at once and overtake Markov, and warn him to draw into cover. Off with you! We must find out who the horsemen are and their strength," I added to Zoiloff.

"There is a small wood there, which will do for cover, Count," he replied instantly. "Let the men ride there and take our horses, while you and I stay on foot to watch the newcomers."

I told Spernow to post the men in the covert, and Zoiloff and I lay down in some bushes to wait for the pursuers.

It was an anxious moment, and we lay close together, whispering in hurried conference. We had not long to wait.

"I hear them," whispered Zoiloff, gripping my arm. His ears were quicker than mine, but a moment later I, too, caught the clatter of horses' feet and then the clash of accoutrements.

"Troops," I whispered; and we both peered between the bushes, straining our ears, through the grey twilight of the dawn.

As they reached the foot of the rise near the top of which we were concealed the party slackened speed, first to a trot and then to a walk, to ease the horses.

"I hope to Heaven none of our horses neigh," whispered Zoiloff earnestly.

I made no reply. I was too anxious for speech, for such a chance might ruin everything. I almost held my breath as the first of the horsemen came into view, and then my companion gripped my arm again in a spasm of irresistible excitement.

"Kolfort, by the luck of hell!" he breathed, and sure enough, in the second line of three, I recognised the grim, stern face of that implacable man.

So excited was I that I almost forgot to count the men with him, and a thousand thoughts, wild and incoherent, rushed through my mind as the band of horsemen came up at a quick walking pace, got abreast, then passed on up the rise, and dipped out of sight as they broke again into a gallop, the footfalls of the horses dying away very quickly over the summit of the hill.

"I hope to the Lord he's going to the Princess!" exclaimed Zoiloff as we scrambled to our feet.

"More likely he wants to be in a position to prove his absence from the city when the Prince is being carried off," said I. "But wherever he's going we must know and follow."

I ran across to where our men were posted and told off one of them to follow hot on the heels of the party and be ready to guide us, and I gave him enough start of us to allow for our not being heard.

"It's clear he wasn't following us," said Zoiloff. "There were only twelve men all told in the party. What a chance we have missed! If we had only known, we could have lined the road just where we two lay, and they'd have walked right into the trap. Only twelve to nearly twenty of us! and we should have had him safe enough. God! If we could only get hold of him, the safety of the Princess would be a simple matter enough."

"We may do it yet," said I as I mounted, and we set off again in pursuit of those we had believed to be in pursuit of us.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE ATTACK

IT was true enough of course that we had missed a glorious chance in not surprising and overcoming General Kolfort's party and making him a prisoner ; but with our end in view it would have been madness to risk an encounter when we had absolutely no knowledge of the strength opposed to us. A defeat at such a moment would have overthrown all our plans and have involved the abandonment of Christina to whatever fate might be in store for her.

It was true, too, that in allowing the General to pass and his men to get in touch with the others who were guarding the Princess, we had increased our difficulties ; and the result of a hurried consultation with Zoiloff as we rode forward was a decision to seek and overtake the General's party and try conclusions with them.

For this purpose, however, we had wasted valuable time, and the now rapidly lightening dawn greatly lessened the chance of catching them unawares, and vastly increased the risk. But we were in no mood to count the chances too gingerly and we dashed along at as rapid a pace as our horses could travel.

The road was execrable—rough and uneven beyond description, with large loose stones scattered about in it in a way that made the going exceedingly difficult, and in parts galloping was impossible.

We had ridden in this way about half an hour, con-

stantly having to draw rein for either the roughness of the road or the steep hills, when we came up with the man we had sent to warn Markov, and the other who had been despatched to follow the General's party.

Markov had undertaken the spy work in preference to the man I had despatched, and the change was a good one. I had not been free from the fear that Markov might be surprised by the General, despite our precaution in sending to warn him, and it was good news that he was safe.

We did not stay our progress a moment. The men rode by my side as each in turn gave me his report, and then dropped back into the ranks behind as we thundered forward, eager to overtake the General before he should fall in with any other troops; and the best news that the men brought us was that we were gaining fast upon them, and that Kolfort was not far ahead.

This spurred us to further effort, and we were rushing on filled with the hope of catching him, when I saw Markov in the distance galloping wildly in our direction. I ordered a halt instantly, and drew up to await him.

"I have tracked them, my lord," he said hurriedly; "but the news is bad. General Kolfort and his party are in a house, about a mile ahead, that belongs to him, and it is there the Princess Christina has been carried. At least I judge so, for I slipped from my horse and managed to find out that there were a number of soldiers about; and I spied a travelling carriage in front of the house with all the signs of a long journey on it. The horses had been taken out, and I judged it had just been left where it stopped, the horses being taken to the stables. I saw General Kol-

fort's party halt there, and he and one or two with him entered the house while the soldiers went round to the back."

"How many soldiers in all?" I asked.

"From what I heard in the city last night, I gathered there were about a dozen in charge of the Princess; I counted another dozen with General Kolfort—say from twenty-five to thirty, all told, sir."

"We can do it if we surprise them," said I, turning to Zoiloff. "Not so good a chance as we had just now, but still a chance."

"Certainly," he agreed. "Catch them while off their guard and probably getting food after their ride;" and in less than a minute we were moving forward again, Markov riding on my left.

Just before we came in full view of the house, Zoiloff, Spernow, and I rode forward to reconnoitre the ground and plan the attack. The house lay well situated for such an attempt. We were looking down on it from a slight hill, and on three sides some fairly thick wood and shrubbery shut it in, in which a couple of regiments could have been posted had we had such a force available. We could see three or four men in the front of the house and in the road, left to do sentry work; but they were lolling about chatting together, and obviously thinking of nothing less than any such attack in force as we meditated; and, had we dashed up the road in a body, it was likely enough we could have carried the place before any effective resistance could have been offered.

But we formed a far different plan. Markov led us along the ridge of the hill fringed with trees to a point from which we could command a view of the rear of the house, and then I observed something that gave

me an idea and made my heart leap with exultation. Preparations were going forward quickly to give the soldiers their breakfast, and I saw all the things being carried from the house to a low building across a wide yard that looked like a barn. The soldiers were chaffing the women and helping to carry the food and vessels; and in a moment my plan was ready.

"We shall catch them like rats in a trap," I cried to Zoiloff, as I pointed this out to him. "The place is made for us and couldn't be better. We'll time our visit when the men are just at breakfast yonder, and, if a couple of our fellows can steal up unseen, that big door can be slammed, and there won't be more than half a dozen left for us to deal with about the house. We shall cage the old fox to a certainty. Let Spernow and two men creep along this way and down under cover of those trees to the entrance to the yard, and post themselves there. The main portion can get to the house through the orchard below us"—and I pointed to the spots I meant—"and we shall be into the place before they even dream that we are near. Once we get close to the house, do you and half a dozen make for the front and settle with anyone there, making an exit from the house impossible. I'll enter by the back with the rest of us and square accounts with anyone inside. The horses must be left up here in the woods, tethered; we can't spare a man to stay with them."

We discussed the minor points of the attack, fixed the moment, and left it that Spernow's closing the door upon the troops at breakfast should be the signal. If things went wrong with him and the men escaped, we settled that Zoiloff should, as arranged, rush round to the front, but that I and the men with

me should hasten to Spernow's assistance and attack the men there.

We went back to the rest of the party, led them all into the wood on the hill from where we had made our observations, had the horses fastened over the hill and well out of sight of the house, and then, with arms all ready, crept back to the edge of the wood to wait for the moment to commence.

The movement and bustle of preparation were going on briskly below ; the maids and the men were hurrying and scurrying in all directions, and there was such stir and life that it threatened to be impossible for us to creep down unseen.

Gradually there came a change. Things grew quieter, and presently the servant girls went into the house and did not return. We saw the soldiers, laughing and joking, cross in couples and threes to the barn ; two of those who had been on guard in the front came running round, rested their muskets against the wall of the barn outside and joined their comrades within ; and the place was quiet and unguarded. I gave the word to advance, and a moment later we began to wend our way stealthily down the hill-side, closing gradually on the house. Not a word was spoken, and not a sound betrayed our presence. When we reached the point where Spernow was to leave us to get to the other end of the yard, I whispered to him to take an extra man in case of emergencies, and then at the head of my men I threaded my way up the side of the orchard, with Zoiloff close in attendance.

All went well. We reached a low mud wall that parted the orchard from the homestead yard, and halted there until Spernow should give the signal by slamming to the great barn door. By peering through the

branches of some fruit trees I could see the spot where he was to post himself. Just when all was about in readiness, and he and his three men were standing at the end of the barn, round the corner of it fortunately, one of the soldiers came out, picked up one of the muskets leaning against the wall, and stood a moment laughing and chaffing with those within. He was one of the sentries, and called to those within to be quick. Then, whistling carelessly, he shouldered his weapon and moved away.

Moments were growing precious now. Would Spernow wait for the man to disappear round the front at the risk that others of the soldiers would finish and come out, or would he act while the man was in full view and take the risk of a shot? He was in dire hesitation; and I could see him peep round the corner of the barn and peer anxiously after the man.

Then something seemed to decide him—he told me afterwards he heard the men in the barn beginning to move—and with quick, stealthy steps he and his men rushed to the great door, slammed it to, and secured it. The soldier was attracted by the noise, turned, saw what had happened, raised an alarm, and was in the act of firing at Spernow when one of the latter's men shot him and he fell to the ground.

At the same time Zoiloff called his followers and dashed for the front of the house, while I, seeing that all was well with Spernow, rushed to the back door. It was slammed in my face, but a blow from our guns smashed it in, and after a short delay we gained the passage.

All the house was in wild alarm, and the soldiers in it put themselves in my way, offering a stubborn resistance. But we outnumbered them by three to one,

and after a scrimmage that was hot enough while it lasted we overpowered them, struck their weapons from their hands, bound them, and thrust them into a room in the custody of a couple of men with strict orders to shoot if any nonsense was attempted.

Our surprise was in that respect completely and triumphantly successful, but in regard to one of the chief objects it failed. The way which we had chosen for Zoiloff to make his rush to the front of the house was blocked by some outhouses which we had not seen, and he and his men had had to return and run round to the other side. The delay caused was not long, but it was fatal, for the first thing he saw on reaching there was General Kolfort in company with a couple of attendants, presumably officers, spurring at topmost speed in the direction of Samakovo. He came rushing into the house, his face black in his deep disappointment, and told me the ill news, just as we had finished our scrimmage with the men inside.

I saw at once pursuit would be hopeless. I should not have dared divide our little party even had there been a good prospect of overtaking the fugitives, and to send them on a wild-goose chase would have been worse than madness; moreover, our horses were away on the top of the hill, and already somewhat spent with the fierce ride. But it took some moments to get Zoiloff to see the uselessness of such an attempt—moments that could ill be spared, seeing all that we had yet to do. But I was firm, and he gave in at length.

“Take our men and secure those fellows in the barn, or we shall have them breaking out. Find the best horses you can, too, and have them into the carriage as quickly as possible, and I will see the Princess and

tell her to be ready at once. We dare not waste a minute or all will be lost."

I dashed up the stairs, and after searching a couple of empty rooms found one with the door locked.

"Are you there, Princess? It is I, Count Benderoff," I cried, turning the key and partly opening the door.

She answered me and I entered. She was calm but pale, with the little Broumoff at her side, very agitated.

"We have heard the noise, but could see nothing from here, and have been filled with anxiety as to what it meant. What has happened?" cried the Princess.

"I can say no more now than that when we heard last night that you had been carried off we followed at once, and happily are now in possession of the house; but you must be ready to fly at once."

"What of General Kolfort? He came here only a few minutes since and threatened me with all the terrors of a Russian gaol. He was like a madman."

"Most unluckily he has escaped us, and may return at any moment in force. Will you get ready at once? Our only hope is to make for the frontier before we can be pursued."

"I am ready now," she cried, throwing on her travelling wraps. "Come, Nathalie, come, the Count has saved us."

The girl was dressed almost as quickly as the Princess, and together we went down to the front to wait for the carriage.

"Have you had anything to eat? We have a long journey before us."

"I could not think of food."

Without a word, I got some milk and cakes and bread, and put them in the carriage, to which Markov

was already harnessing horses. Then I described in the fewest possible words what had happened, and they both listened in breathless interest.

"And Michel?" asked Mademoiselle Broumoff eagerly.

"Is safe," I answered, with a smile, "and has behaved splendidly, like the magnificent fellow he is."

As soon as the carriage was ready I told Markov to draw out into the road in readiness to start, and I ran through to call off our men. Zoiloff met me excited, hot, and breathing hard.

"We have secured them all right. I filed up the men, and when we threw open the door the caged men were met with a line of muskets. They had no fight in them, for they had no arms. We have bound every man, and to make pursuit impossible I have had every horse in the stables shot. A cruel job, but necessary; and I have brought away the men's arms. We may start, Count. Our men are already away for their horses, and will meet us at that bend in the road above."

"Good," said I; but I wished he had brought the horses with us for remounts instead of shooting them.

"Good, yes; but much better if that wily old devil, Kolfort, hadn't slipped through my fingers."

"What is the route, Markov?" I said, going out to him. "We dare not return to Sofia. How can you reach the nearest point on the frontier road where we can get fresh horses for the carriage?"

"We must go back to within three miles of the city, sir, and then I can pick a way round and strike the west road there."

"Don't keep on this road for a yard longer than is absolutely necessary. It is dangerous. But do your

best. Push on with all speed. We shall overtake you."

As I finished speaking Spernow came running from the house and rushed to the carriage window. I let the carriage stand half a minute that he might exchange a word or two with Mademoiselle Broumoff, who I knew was very eager to see him, and while they were speaking the Princess looked out of the window, beckoned Zoiloff, and gave him her hand and a word of hearty thanks for all he had done in her behalf.

It was a thoughtful, gracious act, and I was as glad as Zoiloff himself, who stood aside with a flush on his stern face to let the carriage pass when I gave the word to Markov to start.

"The fairest and best of all women on earth," he said, enthusiastically, as we three watched the carriage dash up the hill that led from the house. "I hope to heaven we shall get start enough to save her;" and he glanced back anxiously along the road that Kolfort had gone, as if he feared that pursuit might already be on foot.

And the same fear infected us all as we followed his gaze. But there was no sign of any pursuit; and we hurried up the hill to the spot where the men were to meet us with our horses.

CHAPTER XXV

SUSPENSE

AS we three hurried up the hill we discussed earnestly our plans ; and the supreme seriousness of the failure to secure the person of General Kolfort grew more vividly forcible the more we considered it.

We could have held him a prisoner in his own house easily and without creating any alarm at his disappearance. And the Princess could have gained the frontier before ever a question had been asked as to her whereabouts. I gnashed my teeth as I thought of it.

Now, however, he would raise the alarm at the first possible moment. He knew that we were in considerable force, and not only could he send troops after us, but by telegraph he could send instructions to have us intercepted at any one of a dozen points.

"Does anyone know where the wires run from Ichman and Samakovo to Sofia?" I asked. "If we could cut them, we might save some hours when even minutes may be vital."

"Of course. Why didn't we think of it before?" exclaimed Zoiloff. "I know them. They run along the course of the projected railway. I can find them inside an hour. The line is to touch Liublian, and must run close here somewhere."

"Then take a couple of men as soon as we are mounted and rattle off across country and cut them, and rejoin us with all possible speed. You will easily

overtake the carriage ;” and the moment we met our men he started to carry out the plan.

I then arranged the order of our ride. I left Spornow in command of the greater number of men, with orders to follow in straggling formation until we had passed through Liublian ; then they were to close up and keep the carriage in sight. One man was to ride about a mile or so in the rear to watch for any signs of pursuit. For this work I chose the man whose horse was the fleetest and freshest, and ordered him to keep a sharp lookout behind him, and at the first sign of anything wrong to gallop after us at top speed to give us the earliest possible warning.

I myself took three men with me and rode forward at once, intending to overtake the Princess and act as immediate escort.

I had little difficulty, unfortunately, in getting up with the carriage, for Markov, with all his skill as coachman, was only able to make a very indifferent pace over the villainous roads. The carriage bumped and rolled and jumped in the deep ruts and over the stones in a way that filled me with alternate fear that it was travelling too fast for the safety of the occupants, and of despair that so slow a pace would make pursuit an easy enough matter.

It was a great, heavy, lumbering, travelling coach, built for the comfort of those who were content to travel at an easy rate ; and about as little suited for the purpose of rapid flight as anything could be. I could have cursed it, as it lumbered along groaning, creaking, straining, threatening to topple over at every other lurch, and distressing the horses, powerful though they were, until the sweat lathered on their flanks and dripped on the rough, cruel road.

“Is there a hope of getting any better carriage at

Liublian?" I asked Markov, riding up to him as we neared that place. "We shall never reach the frontier in this thing; an open cart would be better. Try if you can't get something. Steal it if you can't hire or buy it."

"The horses are nearly done already, your Honour," said Markov; "although we've only come some seven miles. I'll try."

"You must be quick," I said, as I fell back behind again.

Despite the very urgent need for haste, we entered the place driving very leisurely, and drew up at the inn, when Markov and I entered to make inquiries. We were in luck. The man had a comparatively light open cart for sale and a couple of strong young horses. A few minutes found the bargain struck, and while my men were refreshing themselves the horses were put in, and Christina and her companion left the great ugly, cumbersome carriage to take their places in the cart.

"Could we get peasants' clothes?" suggested Made-moiselle Broumoff. "Any kind of disguise might help us." It was a happy thought, and the ever resourceful Markov acted on the hint directly, and procured cloaks and headgear.

"Better put them on when we are clear of the place," I decided, as Markov put the bundle into the cart.

"I am afraid you will find the road to safety very rough, Princess," I said as I helped her into the cart. I had not spoken to her since leaving the General's house.

"I am causing you all sore trouble," she answered, smiling sadly. "How shall I ever thank you enough?"

"We shall have our reward when we see you safe in Servia."

"Ah, I ought to have done what you advised

yesterday and have gone then. All this would have been spared us."

"We could not foresee what old Kolfort had planned for last night. I thought the road would have been as open to-day as it was yesterday."

"It is like you to lighten the blame, but it is my fault."

"We are ready, your Honour," called Markov.

"Forward then," I said. "Cautiously out of Liublian, and then press on with all the speed you can make."

I mounted, and was in the act of starting when a horseman was seen riding hard up the road we had come. It was Zoiloff, and I welcomed him gladly.

"I've done it," he said exultantly. "I don't know whether there are any other wires, but I've cut the main ones, and that will probably cause some delay. But how came you to halt here?" he asked anxiously.

I explained the change of vehicles, and we rode on after the Princess.

"You passed Spernow?" I asked.

"Yes, and left my men to follow with his. He tells me he is to join you as soon as he is clear of Liublian; he should be near now;" and he glanced back as I thought with some anxiety.

"We have done well so far. It was a stroke of luck to get rid of that lumbering old carriage," said I.

"True, but we have already been a long time covering very little ground, and must press forward. Our pursuers won't sleep on the road. I'm surprised we haven't heard from them before now."

It was unlike him to meet alarm half way in this fashion, but I made no answer except to urge my horse to greater speed, so as to close up the distance between us and the Princess.

Markov was now driving at a very rapid rate, the road was much better, and I felt my spirits rise as we covered the ground quickly. Every yard gained safely made the prospect of escape more hopeful.

"Spernow should have joined us by now," said Zoiloff again presently, as we were breathing the horses up a steep hill.

"We have been travelling much faster since we changed conveyances, and his cattle may be a bit stale," I replied, trying to reassure him.

"I'm afraid something's going wrong with him. It's not like him to play the laggard in this way. Can he have been overtaken by Kolfort's men and surprised?"

"Scarcely that. We've got a picket thrown out behind and he'd have warning. If there was any sign of danger, I told him to close up with us at once, so that we could make a stand together. One or two of the horses may have given out."

"I don't like it," said Zoiloff; and when we reached the top of the hill we turned and looked back along the white road, searching eagerly for some sign of Spernow's coming. We saw nothing, and the doubts which made Zoiloff's face so grave began to affect me.

"I am inclined to go back," he murmured.

"We can't spare you, Zoiloff," said I quickly. "If anything is wrong with him, you alone can do no good; and if anything is to go wrong with us, we are too few already for safety."

"I could find out what it means."

"Or be cut off yourself;" and with that we resumed our ride, my companion's face unusually gloomy and thoughtful.

"How far are we from Sofia, Markov; and when do you turn off?" I asked, riding up to him.

"About five miles from the city, your Honour, a

little more than two from the branch road I am making for."

"We've only a few minutes more on the main road, I said, falling back to Zoiloff; "and, once away from it, our chances will be fifty in a hundred better. It's this road I've feared."

"Ha! Here comes news!" exclaimed my companion suddenly, a few minutes afterwards, turning in his saddle and looking back. "And bad news too," he added.

A single horseman was dashing down a hill behind us, and as we turned a number of other horsemen reached the crest and came streaming down the hill after him, the sunlight glistening through the cloud of white dust as it fell on their arms.

"That should be Spernow and our men," said I anxiously.

"It is Spernow, but they're not our men. I feared it meant mischief. They are troopers; and I can count a dozen of them. Tell Markov to drive like the wind. They're after us."

A bend in the road at that moment cut off our view, and almost directly afterwards Markov turned away to the left into a narrow lane, putting his horses to the gallop.

"We shall have to fight for it, Count," cried Zoiloff. "There didn't seem more than a dozen troopers that I could see, and, with Spernow, we shall be six. We can hold them at bay in this narrow lane, and perhaps drive them off."

At that moment a loud shout of dismay came from Markov, and we saw him pull his horses up in a scramble.

"What's the matter?" I called, riding up.

"I've taken the wrong lane, your Honour, cursed

fool that I am," he cried in sore distress. "I know it now; there is no outlet. I should have driven on for about five hundred yards farther;" and he backed his horses as if to turn them.

It spelt absolute ruin.

"There's no going back, Markov," I said decisively. I was calm enough now for all the trouble.

"The devil!" exclaimed Zoiloff. "Well, we must make a fight of it."

"Stay a moment. Where does this lane lead, Markov?"

"To a peasant's homestead, with no outlet anywhere."

"Forward to that, then—at a gallop. We can hold the house against the men with far better chances than here," I said to Zoiloff. "Besides, they may not have seen us turn off the road, and may go on to the next turning. But what of Spernow?"

"He was gaining on them fast, and will escape in any event," said Zoiloff; "but it's a perilous fix."

A couple of minutes later we halted in front of the cottage, to the infinite surprise of the inmates. Markov knew them however, and while he was explaining things to them the rest of us set to work to put the place in readiness to resist the expected attack. Fortunately it lent itself well to the purpose; and, long before the peasant owner had been pacified with a good round sum of money, every door and window was closed and barred, and the horses and cart had been stabled close to the rear of the house in a shed, the door of which we could easily command, so as to prevent anyone trying to steal off with them.

The Princess and her companion were placed in an upper room, well out of the danger of stray bullets; and, though we were breathless with our exertions,

we were quite prepared to give our visitors a warm reception before a sign of the soldiers or of Spernow was visible.

Both Zoiloff and I kept an anxious lookout from a window in the roof of the cottage which gave a view of a considerable portion of the lane that led to the homestead ; but the minutes crept on until a quarter of an hour, half an hour, an hour passed without a sign or trace of either our friend or our enemies ; and, indeed, until we grew as anxious to see the former as to know we had escaped from the latter.

What could it mean ? Zoiloff and I exchanged many an anxious question and hazarded many futile guesses. I was inclined to hope that the soldiers had not seen us after all, and that in our little hiding-place we had not only escaped them, but had been overlooked by any other parties that might have been despatched in search of us.

At the end of an hour I sent Zoiloff down to see that food was prepared both for the men and for our horses ; and when another hour passed without any sign of disturbance the hopes of all of us began to rise. The one thing that had caused me more anxiety than anything else was the obstacle which daylight presented to a successful flight ; and when noon came and passed, and the afternoon shadows began to lengthen, I was glad enough ; for every hour that passed diminished the risk and increased our chances of getting to the frontier unseen in the darkness of the night.

Moreover, the rest was just what the horses needed ; and thus on both accounts the hanging hours of safety on that hot summer's day were doubly precious to us. Markov was certain that under the cover of the night he could find his road unerringly ; and though his blun-

der in the morning had at first caused such a panic and had shaken my confidence in his knowledge, I was ready to believe him now.

"I could drive it blindfolded, your Honour," he said earnestly, when I questioned him. "I know every house, and cottage, and tree, almost every bump in the road—more than that, I could find my way secretly across the country were every road and bridle-path choked with armed men. It is my own country!" he exclaimed vehemently.

"How long will it take you?"

"It is fifty miles from the frontier to the first place where I can get fresh horses, and perhaps fifteen from here to that—at the outside say seventy miles. I can do it in seven hours with such horses as are waiting for me at every stage—probably less."

"You will be ready to start as soon as it is dusk," I told him, and, as the afternoon passed, I went to acquaint the Princess with our plans.

"You have left us long alone, Count," she said with a smile. "And I have needed you sorely. Nathalie here is in distress for news of Lieutenant Spernow."

"You may feel assured on his account," I said to the girl, who was very pale and troubled. "When we saw him last he was gaining rapidly on his pursuers, and was not at all likely to fall into their hands."

"But where is he? Why have you no news of him?" she wailed.

"Probably he knows no more than our enemies where we are. But he is safe. Both Captain Zoiloff and I are convinced of that." Her fears were not to be stayed by words, however, and in truth I myself had more than a misgiving on his account.

The Princess was eager for the moment to come when

she could start, and would have set out at once had I not told her of the far greater security which darkness would afford.

"What time is it now?" she asked.

"Just past four. At seven, or soon after, we may venture to start; and if all goes well, as Heaven grant it may, you will be across the frontier and in safety before the sun rises again."

"I shall owe it to you," she said, "as indeed I owe so much already."

"Not more to me than to all here with us. Indeed, this blessing of a shelter at the very nick of time we owe to the accident of Markov's blunder. We may well forgive him such a happy mistake."

"Would you have me think I owe nothing to you?" she asked in a low voice, looking at me with a glance of love.

"Perhaps I may answer that question at a future time," I returned in the same low tone. She blushed and dropped her eyes and was silent.

In the silence I heard the sounds of some commotion in the house below, and I started uneasily. "Something has happened; I must go and see what it means!" I exclaimed; and with a hasty excuse I hurried away.

Something had indeed happened, for at the bottom of the stairs I found Spornow and Zoiloff in excited talk. I called them up, and together we entered the Princess's room, that he might tell us the story of his experiences, and relieve at once the anxiety of his sweetheart.

On seeing him she jumped up and, regardless of our presence, threw herself into his arms.

"Are you really safe, Michel?" she asked, gazing into his face with a look I could understand readily,

and, laughing and crying by turns, she plied him with a hundred questions.

His story was of deep interest and moment to us, and, though I was in full mood to sympathise with the lovers, I was eager to hear it.

"I can tell my story in a very few words," he said at length, turning to us. "Just after we left Liublian we were attacked by a party that outnumbered us by five to one. Our man in the rear galloped up to warn us as you had ordered him, Count, but the troops were right on his heels, and, as our horses were anything but fresh, I dared not risk a race in the effort to reach you. I determined to fight it out there and then, but from the first we hadn't a chance. The troops fired not at us, but at the horses, until only two of us were left mounted. The rest you can gather. We had never a chance. My men resisted as long as resistance was possible, but one after another they were surrounded, disarmed, and secured. When all was lost we two fled, but some dozen of the troops came pricking after us. My companion's horse was shot; but almost by a miracle neither my horse nor myself was touched, though the firing was heavy enough. When I came down that hill yonder, I saw you, and saw you turn into the lane. In a moment I knew the mistake you had made, for I know this country to a yard, and it occurred to me to pass the entrance to the lane in the hope that the troops behind me had not seen you. I made for the next turning, therefore—that which you should have taken but happily did not—and to my intense relief the men behind, thinking no doubt that I was following you, followed me. The rest was easy enough. My horse was fleetier than theirs, and I led them a dance at a rattling speed for some ten miles. Then I dismounted, and, giving my horse a whack

with my hand, sent him on without me, while I slipped into some bushes and waited for the men to pass. They did this, swearing prettily, as you may imagine, and as soon as they had gone by I set off across country in a bee-line for this place, thinking it not unlikely that you would take refuge here for a while. And here I am, and that's all."

Our congratulations poured upon him, and then Zoiloff and I went away, that he and the little Broumoff might be together. It was the best reward we could make him just then.

"Those men will try back when they find he's fooled them," said Zoiloff, "and we had better be ready."

"They'll have to come soon," said I, "or they'll find the nest empty and the birds flown."

"They've over two hours yet," he returned drily, and together we went back to our watch-window in the roof, giving orders that the house was to be kept as silent as if it were deserted.

The minutes were weighted now with the old fears and suspense, and scarce a word passed between my staunch friend and myself. And when we spoke it was in a whisper, as though the men had already come. For an hour more nothing occurred to disturb us, and once again the flame of hope began to kindle. But it was only to be ruthlessly quenched.

When a glance at my watch told me that an hour and a quarter had gone by we saw that which made us start and draw breath quickly.

Two troopers came riding slowly up the lane, looking carefully to right and left as they approached. The peasant's dog barked loudly, and at the sound they stopped, and peered curiously at the house. Then they advanced until they stood close to the yard-gate, and both stared at the house and spoke together,

We held our breath in suspense.

The closed doors and shutters puzzled them, and after a few moments one of them dismounted, handed the reins of his horse to his companion, pushed open the gate, and walked up towards the house.

At that moment fortune served us a scurvy trick. Down below a roar of laughter broke out among our men, loud enough to reach us.

The soldier heard it too.

We heard him strike a lusty summons on the door panels and call to those within. Then everything was as still as the grave.

The man knocked again, and when the door remained unopened he went back to his companion, mounted his horse, and, giving some instructions, set off up the lane at a quick canter. The second man drew back into the shade of a tree and waited, keeping his eyes warily upon the house all the while.

"We may as well get the men posted," said Zoiloff. "That fellow will be back in a minute with all there are with him. We're in for a scrimmage."

He went down at once to give the necessary orders, while I stayed to watch.

I had not long to wait. In a few minutes I heard the advancing footfalls of horses, and a number of troopers came swinging up the lane at the trot. I counted thirteen in all, and thanked Heaven there were no more.

But it meant fight, and I saw the man in command of the party taking his observations, and giving his instructions to those under him to surround the house.

There was no need for me to watch longer. There would soon be plenty of other work on hand.

CHAPTER XXVI

A FORLORN HOPE

I LEFT the window and hurried down to tell the Princess the bad news. Spernow was still there, sitting apart, exchanging love confidences with Mademoiselle Broumoff, and they all started up at my sudden entrance.

"The troops have found us out, Princess, and there will probably be some trouble before we get rid of them and shake them off. I wish to impress upon you the necessity for you to remain close in the corners of the room for fear of mishap. Spernow, will you go to Captain Zoiloff? He is below with the men."

The Princess took the news very calmly.

"Do you think they will attack the house?" she asked.

"I fear so—or, rather, I hope so; for, if not, we shall have to attack them, and I would rather act on the defensive."

"There will be danger for you," she said earnestly, looking into my eyes. "You will be careful—for my sake;" and she laid her hand on mine.

"I hope it will not be serious, and I will be careful," I replied smiling. "But we must not be beaten."

"I trust no blood will be shed—no lives sacrificed. I cannot bear the thought of that."

"We can have no thought but your safety."

"But can we not be of some use—Nathalie and I?"

"I fear not, at present. But if there is need, depend upon it I will not fail to ask you. Come, Spernow."

"Michel, let me have a gun. I would rather be by your side than cooped up here in suspense," cried the girl with great spirit, holding her lover's hand. "Now that you are with us I am not afraid."

"We have not come to that yet, Mademoiselle," I said, liking her spirit and courage. "You need not be afraid. We are quite strong enough behind these walls to cope with the few men against us. But we must go."

Christina pressed my hand again, and her lips murmured a prayer for my safety.

Zoiloff had been busy enough with his preparations, and when we reached him had posted his men. He had done a shrewd trick on leaving General Kolfort's house, and had brought away with him the men's carbines with a quantity of ammunition. These were now distributed in the rooms from which the work of defence was to be carried on; and he explained that his object was to create the impression that we were a much more numerous party than in reality.

"We can fire volleys from the different windows in very rapid succession, and they'll think the place is alive with men," he said. "But the main work must be done from the windows of each room on the floor above us. There are two in the front room and one at the back, and we can from there command the approach to the front and back doors, and could hold the place against four times the number."

We went to the front room and looked out.

The soldiers were taking matters very leisurely. Evidently they were confident that they would have

no serious difficulty in carrying the house, even if we were inside, of which they still seemed to have doubts.

The leader was only a non-commissioned officer—a troop sergeant—and he appeared to be at a loss what to do. He was consulting with the two men who had ridden up first, and all three were gesticulating freely as they pointed to different parts of the house and yard.

The longer they debated, and the more time they wasted, the better for us. If they would only let the afternoon steal away and twilight come, we could in the last resource make a sally, have a brush at close quarters, and then trust to our horses to save us.

“Zoiloff, I have a plan,” I said, as an idea struck me. “That man has made a fool’s mistake. Every horse there is in full view, and can be picked off easily. Let our first volleys, when it comes to firing, be for the horses. Before the men even guess our intention, every horse will be killed or disabled, and not only will the men be unable to follow us, but prevented from riding for help.”

“Good!” he cried. “We’ll have every man at these two windows, and each man shall pick out his own target. A couple of rounds well aimed and the thing’s done. But someone must keep a lookout at the back.”

“Nathalie will do that,” said Spernow eagerly ; and he went at once to ask her, while the men were brought into the room and their orders given to them. We waited, watching closely for the commencement of hostilities.

“They don’t like the look of things,” whispered Zoiloff, smiling grimly, “and don’t know what to do or how to start. Ah, now they’ve settled something,”

he added as the leader came towards the house, knocked at the door, and called in a loud voice for it to be opened.

No answer was given, of course, and after he had repeated his summons he called :

“If the door is not opened we shall break it in.”

Getting no reply, he returned to his men, and sent four of them round to the back of the house. Then one of the men called his attention to something at the side of the yard, and eight of them went and picked up a heavy balk of timber lying there.

“They’re going to use it as a battering-ram,” said Zoiloff. “We must stop that.”

“Wait,” I said quickly. “When they are in position I’ll warn them, and through the open windows we can then shoot the horses. Remember, men, level your guns first at the men, and when I tell you, aim at the horses, and shoot straight.”

The timber was heavy, the afternoon hot, the men fatigued and with no great zest for the business, so that they took a long time before they had brought it round near the door.

Then I threw up the window sharply, and called, in a ringing voice :

“Stop! We sha’n’t allow that.”

Looking up, the troopers found themselves covered by the guns of our party, and, dropping the timber, they rushed like hares for cover—all save the leader, who flung curses at them for their cowardice.

“Now fire,” I said ; and, levelling my rifle, I picked out a horse, and we fired our first volley.

“Quick! again!” and a second volley rang out.

The effect was indescribable. Five horses fell at the first round, and the rest stampeded and plunged so

violently that any accurate aim the second time was very difficult. Only three fell, but the rest broke from their fastenings in a very frenzy of fear and galloped wildly off, plunging across country at a speed that made any thought of pursuit hopeless.

The men started to follow them, but were recalled by the leader, and came slinking back to cover like whipped dogs.

The loss of the horses was not their only misfortune, however, for in getting the log they had set down their carbines near the gate in a spot which we could cover with our guns. Seeing this, I called again :

"The man who touches one of those guns will be shot !"

The sergeant had plenty of pluck, and, though sorely perplexed by the turn things had thus suddenly taken, was as cool as if he had been on parade.

"What do you want here?" I cried.

"I want to know who's in the house," he said.

"I am. What next?"

"Who else?"

"I decline to say."

"Will you surrender without causing any more trouble?" he asked coolly.

"If you ask that again, you'll stand a good chance of asking no more questions in this world," said I drily. "You had better draw off your men while they are still unhurt."

"You can't hope to beat us off," he said doggedly.

"We can try." At the reply he shrugged his shoulders.

"If you resist you must take the consequences," he called.

"I am quite prepared for that."

He turned away then as if to walk back to his men, but I saw him start; and then he did a really plucky thing, like the daring devil he evidently was. When he was half-way towards his men he made a quick rush to the guns and tried to snatch them up in his arms and bolt with them to cover. It was wasted courage. A couple of guns rang out, Zoiloff's for one, and the man rolled over with a groan, shot through the leg, with the carbines scattered round him.

His men made no effort to go near him, and so long an interval of inaction followed that I began to hope the struggle was already over before it had well begun.

"Lucky we shot those horses, or we should have had half the scoundrels bolting for reinforcements," muttered Zoiloff.

"You'd better see what the men at the back are after," I said; and even as I spoke the little Broumoff came running excitedly to tell us they were trying to get our horses from the shed behind.

Zoiloff hurried out with a couple of men, and a moment later I heard an exchange of shots.

"Run and see what has happened, Spernow, and let me know," I said, and in a couple of minutes he returned to say all was well, and that Zoiloff had wounded one of the men and scared them off. They had made for the side of the house, he told me, and had been joined by the rest of the troopers; unfortunately there was no window at the side, so that we could neither watch nor threaten them.

Another long interval passed without the troopers making a sign of any kind, and I judged that their intention was simply to keep watch until reinforcements could come up, and guessed that they had sent one or more of the men away on foot in search of help.

It was now past six o'clock, and in less than half an hour it would be safe to make a start. I went to Zoiloff to consult.

My plan was to make a rush upon the men and drive them away sufficiently far to admit of our horses being put in the cart, and then risk the chances of flight. He agreed readily, for the inaction was vastly less to his mind than any fighting, and we made our preparations accordingly.

"We are seven to their nine or ten, say. The leader lies there wounded, you have disabled a second man, and they have sent away probably two and certainly one; and as we are armed and they are not, and we shall catch them unawares, we can certainly beat them off. We must then get the horses ready and be off. The sun's low now, and, as there is a mist rising, it will be dark enough for our purposes long before seven. And, anyway, we can't wait here to be trapped like rabbits as soon as they succeed in bringing up reinforcements."

We set to work at once. The barricade of the back door was removed quietly and we all mustered by it in silence.

"Silence till we are outside," I whispered. "Then with a rush fall on them with more noise than force, and scare and drive them off."

I lifted the latch noiselessly and, opening the door, stepped out, followed by the rest. Then with a loud shout we rushed round the house and caught the men as they stood smoking and talking, expecting nothing less than an attack from us.

They fled like chaff, helter-skelter in all directions, not venturing even a pretence at resistance. The two or three who had guns attempted to fire, but we struck

up their arms and they fled as incontinently as the rest.

We made a show of pursuit, but it was no more than a show, and then all hands turned to the work of getting the horses harnessed and saddled. Meanwhile the mist was rising fast, and promised to form a welcome veil to our flight.

As a precaution I told one of our men to ride some distance along the lane to see that the road was clear, although I had no doubt that the troopers had been effectively disposed of; and I went to fetch the Princess and Mademoiselle Broumoff. All was ready and we were in good heart, when the man I had sent out came scampering back with news that filled me with sudden consternation.

He had seen a large body of horse soldiers at the end of the lane on the high road, and with them were several of the men we had just beaten off.

I heard the news with genuine anguish of soul. We were hemmed in. The absence of any outlet except by the lane made escape absolutely hopeless, and for a moment I was borne down with despair.

"We can only make a forlorn hope of it," said Zoiloff. "Charge them and try to make off in the confusion."

I bit my lip and racked my brains in the effort to find some other than this useless, desperate scheme, and then suddenly a light beamed through the darkness.

"Markov, can you find your way across the fields at the back here to the road—on horseback I mean?"

"Yes, certainly, your Honour, but with the cart——"

"Zoiloff, good friend, we must part now. There is only one way. You and Markov must ride with the Princess on horseback, escaping by the back across the

fields till you strike the road. I must go in the cart with Mademoiselle Broumoff, if she is brave enough to risk this for the Princess ;” and I looked at her eagerly.

“ I will do anything,” she assented readily.

“ It will make them think that only we six were in the house here ; that Mademoiselle Broumoff is the Princess, and that we are making the rush to escape after the fight just now.”

“ I cannot consent to that,” said Christina earnestly.

“ You will be going to certain capture.”

I drew her aside from the rest to urge her, and Zoiloff, understanding things with the quick instinct of a friend, led them out of the room on the plea of hastening the preparations.

As soon as we were alone she threw off all reserve, putting her hands on my shoulders and gazing at me with glowing eyes.

“ Do you press me to do this ? ” she pleaded.

“ I must ; it is your only hope of safety, and a desperate one at the best.”

“ You love me—Gerald ? ”

At the sound of my name, spoken prettily in trembling hesitation, I felt the blood rush to my face.

“ With my whole heart,” I cried hoarsely.

“ Do not send me from you, then ; I urge you, by our love. Let us face what has to come together. I could meet death with you, but without you I am a coward. I cannot go.”

“ You must go, Christina,” I said in a low voice, and scarcely steadier than her own.

“ It is sending you to death, Gerald. I cannot do it. I could not live if harm came to you through me.”

“ No such harm as that can come. But, for God’s sake, think. If we remain together now it can be but

for a few minutes. If we fell into these men's hands, their first act would be to separate us. You must go, my darling, you must."

She gave a deep, heavy, sobbing sigh, and let her head fall on my shoulder.

"It is worse than death to go alone like this."

"It is our only chance for a happier life. You must go, and even these moments of delay are imperilling everything. You must go—and at once. God knows how gladly I would have you stay with me if I dared."

"Then go with me. Captain Zoiloff will——" The look on my face checked the sentence. "Oh, I cannot part with you, I cannot!" She moaned in such agony that my heart ached. "We may never meet again."

"We shall meet again with you in safety, do not fear," I said, trying to put a ring of hope into my voice, though my heart echoed her cry. "You must go, my dearest;" and I began to lead her to the door, for every moment now might turn the balance between safety and capture.

As I moved she threw herself into my arms and clung to me convulsively. I held her to my heart; her face was close to me; my lips sought hers, and our very souls seemed to rush together in that kiss.

"Till death, Christina," I whispered passionately.

"Till death, Gerald," she answered; and then with a long, trembling sigh she drew from me. "Oh, how hard is fate!"

"Come, sweetheart," I said; and without another word I led her out to the horses, to where good Zoiloff was waiting with gloomy growing impatience.

I lifted her tenderly to the saddle, and with a last yearning look and a lingering pressure of the hand I turned away, sick and sad with the sorrow of it all.

Zoiloff was mounted by then, and I wrung his hand.

"Guard her with your life, friend."

"With my life," he answered to the full as earnestly as I.

The plucky little Broumoff was already in the cart, with Spernow close to her, and in another moment I was by her side.

There was still no sign of any troopers, and as for my scheme it was necessary that they should see us, I led my party round to the front.

"When you hear the sound of our wheels, steal off at once, and make across the fields there for the road," I said, as a last word; "you will be out of sight in the mist before the men have a thought that we are not all together. Good-bye, and may God speed you!"

"Amen to that," came in Zoiloff's deep voice, and for the last time I met Christina's eyes.

When I reached the front of the house I waited a moment, listening intently, and then hearing the sound of horsemen coming up the lane I started my horses, and as soon as we were through the gate I whipped them and dashed along the lane at a smart gallop, just as the foremost couple of troopers loomed into sight through the shroud of the white mist.

CHAPTER XXVII

A FRIEND IN NEED

ALTHOUGH I was certain that we were rushing straight upon inevitable capture, I still had it in my mind to make a strenuous dash to get through the soldiers, and I flogged the horses vigorously, and told my companion to cling hard to her seat, for the cart swayed and bumped and jolted over the rough road in a manner that threatened to send us sprawling into the lane at every second.

"Draw that hood over your face to conceal it as much as possible, and remember if we are caught I shall address you as 'the Princess,'" I said to my companion. "I can't tell you now what I think of your courage."

She did what I asked, and her features were so concealed that, had the troopers known the Princess by sight, they could not have seen it was not she by my side.

The first party numbered under a dozen men, and as we approached they made no effort to stop us, but drew their horses aside and let us pass.

"Are they following us?" I asked anxiously, for that would be the test whether my ruse was to fail or succeed.

The girl glanced back.

"Yes. They've closed in behind and are galloping after us."

"Thank God for that!" I cried; and I laid the whip on the horses again till they were travelling at headlong, desperate, racing speed.

Then in the mist, as we neared the end of the lane, I saw the main body drawn up in a mass completely blocking the road. They had evidently heard us coming and were prepared for us, and they sat on their horses with their carbines levelled.

"Halt there! or we fire," shouted someone.

But he might as well have shouted to a mountain torrent to stop, for my horses were smarting under the whip I had laid on so generously, and no driver on earth could have stayed their wild rush. Indeed, the words were scarcely out of his lips before we plunged madly right into the midst of them, scattering them to right and left and sending them cannoning one against the other in the utmost confusion.

The officer in command had formed them in a bad order for such a reckless charge as ours. The chief strength was at the sides, and in the middle, where our horses by luck carried us, the line was only two deep.

The check was thus but momentary. There was a violent shock as we dashed against the first horseman; my horses stumbled and I thought would fall. My companion and I were jerked violently forward nearly on to their backs, but in a second and scarcely with a pause they recovered, and before I could realise what had happened we were through the ranks and clear of them, with Spernow and another man close behind us and dashing along again with barely abated fury for the main road.

"Lie down on the floor of the cart; they may fire after us," I cried. The next instant the guns rang out and the bullets came whistling past our ears. But the

aim was bad, and the jolting and swaying of the cart as it lunged over the ruts helped us.

"Are you all right, Spernow?" I called over my shoulder.

"Yes, but I am alone. The two behind me were stopped in that business just now, and the other has just gone down. By God, it was splendidly done, Count. But they're streaming after us in full cry."

I was nearing the corner now, and remembered the sharp awkward turn with something of a shudder. I did not care which way we went; but the cattle knew the road and seemed to care, for they turned for their old stables at Liublian with a swerve that tilted the cart to such an angle that it was nothing less than a miracle that we did not upset.

It righted, however, and once on the main road we darted off on our mad flight at a speed which made the misty air sting my face with rushing damp in it.

I was right glad that we had turned that way. The men behind would be sure to think I had taken it purposely, and thus we should draw off pursuit from Christina effectually, and every mile that we could now contrive to cover meant two miles' start for her.

The race could not continue for long. I knew that, and knew, too, how it must end unless some unforeseen accident happened; but I meant to make the most of the opportunity to lead the men as far from Christina as possible, and with this object I flogged the horses until they flew along like things possessed at such a speed that Spernow, though he was well mounted, could hardly keep up with us.

In this reckless way, up hill and down at the same headlong, breakneck pace, our limbs and lives at hazard with every bad bit of road we covered, we raced for

some miles till we came to the foot of a steep hill, which, I remembered, was as long as it was steep. The horses charged at it in the same gallant, desperate way, but our pursuers had now gained on us and were closing up fast.

They had not fired another volley, and though at first I wondered at this, and could not guess the cause I was soon to learn it. When we turned in the direction of Liublian they knew that we could not escape them, and were content to ride us down or wait till we ran against some other body of troops. The hill now helped them, for the wild pace had distressed my horses until they began to falter at the steep ascent, breathing hard. I flogged them unmercifully ; I would have every yard out of them that was to be got, because it meant a yard longer start for Christina ; but my heart was sore for the brutes, for they had made a valiant effort.

Before we reached the crest of the hill the troops were up with us, and the leader, pointing ahead, called to me to surrender.

"You had better give up the struggle, Count Benderoff," he said, riding abreast of me. "We have another body of men at the top there."

But I was fighting for yards, and my answer was to cut the horses desperately with the whip, so that they sprang forward again with a last frantic effort. The man rode to the nearest horse, and, drawing his revolver, placed it close to the animal's head.

"I shall be sorry to fire, but if you don't stop I shall have no alternative," he called.

"Shall we yield?" I said, turning to the little Broumoff, who had maintained her seat unflinchingly, and pretending to consult her, while I whispered, "Keep your face well concealed."

She nodded, and I drew the horses to a standstill.

"We yield only under protest," I said.

"I am glad you spared me an unpleasant job," replied the officer, putting his revolver away, and saluting the "Princess." "Your animals have made a magnificent struggle, but you have been racing all the time toward certain capture, Count Benderoff. Escape from the first moment was hopeless." We waited then in silence while his men drew up and surrounded us. "Will you drive Her Highness into Liublian?"

All the horses were greatly distressed, and we waited a few minutes for them to recover, and then went forward at a slow pace. I had been anxious to hurry before, but now I kept my animals at the walk, and halted more than once on the steep hill. It was my cue now to waste as much time as possible before the identity of my companion should be discovered, and I thought with glee of the long start which Christina would have.

At the top of the hill the other soldiers met us, and the two officers spoke together for a minute, discussing the incidents of our capture. Then we went forward again at a very slow pace.

We reached Liublian an hour and a half after leaving the homestead; and there again fortune favoured us. No one was there to recognise my companion, and we had to push on to General Kolfort's house, still at a slow pace, for I declared my horses were so beaten they could not travel beyond a walk. I managed to occupy another hour over the drive, and with this start, which meant nearly five hours to Christina, I felt hopeful she would reach the frontier safely. My ruse had succeeded far beyond my best hopes.

As we drew up at the General's house, I smiled to

myself as I pictured his fury at the discovery ; but he was not there. He had returned hastily to Sofia, I overheard ; but the place was packed with troops, and he had left some drastic orders for our disposal.

I helped the plucky little Broumoff from the cart with a very deferential air and led her into the house, Spernow in close attendance. They took us into a room on the ground floor, where three officers awaited us, one of them being Captain Wolasky, who, to my surprise, gave no response to my start of recognition.

A chair was placed for the "Princess," and she was shrewd enough to seat herself so that the light of the lamp left her face in the shadow. I could have laughed at the comedy underlying the situation, but, assuming a tone of hot indignation, I exclaimed :

"I demand to know the reason why I am subjected to this infamous treatment ! What is the meaning of this arrest ?"

The man in the centre of the three looked up angrily :

"It is not in my instructions to give you any such needless information, sir. You must be fully aware of what you have done. You are the Count Benderoff ?"

"I am the Hon. Gerald Winthrop, as well as the Count Benderoff, and a British subject."

"Englishmen are much too prone to meddle in matters that don't concern them, and must be prepared to take the consequences," he answered drily.

"There may also be consequences for those who meddle with them," I returned hotly ; and with the object of provoking him into a personal dispute so as to waste more time, I poured out a volume of protests and objections, together with loud and angry demands

for a specific charge; and in this way prolonged the wrangle for many minutes.

He ordered me at length to be silent, under threat of packing me out of the room, and then he turned to the "Princess."

"I much regret, Princess, to have to put you to inconvenience, but my instructions are imperative. You will have to remain in this house for the night; but arrangements have been made for your personal comfort, and to-morrow General Kolfort's intention will be explained to you."

She made no reply other than to bow, as if in acquiescence.

"I must ask you to remove your disguise," he said next, just as I was hoping she would even then escape recognition. She made no attempt to comply with the request, and it was repeated in a sharper tone.

She turned to me as if to ask what to do, and, seeing the end had come, I broke in:

"This is another of your ridiculous proceedings," I said warmly. "Not only am I personally treated in this outrageous manner, but, because I am seen driving on the highway, you must needs conclude that the Princess Christina is with me. It is shameful."

"What do you mean, sir?" cried the officer hastily.

"Simply that this young lady is no more the Princess Christina than you are. You may as well draw your hood back to show the mistake," I added to Mademoiselle Broumoff, who did so then, to the complete consternation of all the three officers. I could have smiled at their utter bewilderment.

"Where is the Princess Christina?" asked the chief sternly.

"We are at least as anxious as you can be on that

point," I answered. "If your men make blunders of this kind, and don't know the difference between her Highness and her friends, who can tell where she is?"

"You will find it a hazardous work to play tricks on us!" he cried furiously.

"I play tricks on you, indeed! It is you who seem to be amusing yourselves with us," I said, with an insolent laugh. "But you will have to answer for it, I promise you."

"Silence!" he shouted; and I shrugged my shoulders and threw up my hands in response.

He muttered some hurried instructions to Captain Wolasky, who left the room to carry them out. I glanced at my watch. It was a quarter to ten; three hours since Christina had started, and I calculated that, if all had gone well, she would be at least two stages to the frontier, and beyond hope of pursuit by any troops that could now be despatched after her. For aught else I cared nothing.

I edged close to Spornow, and managed to whisper to him:

"If you get a chance try to steal off, you two, in the confusion;" and just as I had said this Captain Wolasky came back with a file of soldiers, and the officer at the table ordered them to lead me away.

"You have your orders, Captain Wolasky," he said in sharp, peremptory tones, and I was led away, Wolasky following me.

He took me out through the hall, now thronged with soldiers, to the front of the house, where a small troop of horsemen were drawn up; and then, halting at a spot where the light of a lamp fell full upon his face, he looked at me with a peculiar expression in his eyes



"I RODE BETWEEN TWO TROOPERS."—Page 299.

which I did not understand, and said in an unnecessarily harsh, strident tone :

"You have played us too many tricks for me to dare to take your parole not to escape, sir ; and if you are treated with indignity you have yourself to blame for it. Bind the prisoner's hands behind him !" he said roughly to a couple of men near ; and a murmur of approval came from the troopers standing around, mingled with a good deal of strong Russian.

"I protest against the outrage !" I shouted, and commenced to struggle. It was useless, of course, and I was held, and my hands fastened behind me. "Where am I being taken ? I demand to know."

"I'll demand you," said Wolasky, in a voice of passion ; and, seizing me, he pushed me forward to where a horse stood riderless.

"Excuse this farce," he whispered ; "but it is necessary ;" and he covered the whisper with a loud imprecation and abuse of me. I was so astonished that I forgot to resist. "Struggle," he whispered again ; and then I set to work to play my part with a will, and fought and struggled so desperately as they were forcing me to mount, that the Captain appeared to lose his temper, and struck at me, taking care, however, that the blow spent itself in the air.

"Watch him," he ordered, "and at the least sign of treachery, shoot him like a dog. It doesn't matter whether he reaches Tirnova alive or dead, so long as he does reach there ;" and again some of the soldiers clustered about, laughed and oathed in evident glee.

I rode between two troopers, whose horses were fastened to mine by light chains attached to the bits, while each man held a rein ; and, as we started in this alarming fashion, some ruffian shouted after us to keep

the "damned English dog safe on the chain." "Tie his legs under the horse's belly, and he'll keep on, dead or alive," cried another; and a burst of ribald laughter followed, in which those about me joined.

In this fashion we rode through Liublian, struck off to the right, and soon after began the ascent of a steep hilly country, which made the travelling very slow. We moved at no more than a walking pace all the time, making, as I judged, about four miles an hour; but we kept on all through the night, and did not halt until the sun was up, and we reached a small village, where we dismounted and had breakfast.

I was overpowered with fatigue, and so soon as I had eaten the food brought to me I fell into a deep sleep. In about three hours I was awakened and the march resumed. The sun was overpowering, and towards midday a halt was called under some trees. Here again I slept, and when, in the late afternoon, I awoke, I was vastly refreshed, and began to think about the chances of escape.

I had been treated all the time with the sternest measures. The Captain did not come near me; and, when we halted, my legs were bound before my hands were liberated for me to take any food. The country was of course entirely strange, and when I asked a question of the men on either side of me they ordered me with an oath to be silent.

When the sun was getting low in the afternoon Captain Wolasky reined up to my side, and, pointing to a road we passed, he said in a jeering, insulting tone, but with the same expression I had noticed on his face the night before:

"That's the road you'd like to take, Mr. Count Englishman; feast your eyes on it, for you won't see it

again, I promise you. See, it leads to Sofia over yonder;" and he pointed far away over the hills to where the sun's rays were shining on some distant buildings.

I looked eagerly enough, for I thought I understood him, and I began to pay special heed to the road along which they took me.

"It's prettier scenery than Tirnova," he cried, with another loud jeering laugh, as he went on again to lead the party.

After that we travelled on a fairly level road for about two miles, when another halt was called for the soldiers' evening meal. My legs were tied as before, and a good meal brought to me, and in moving to put away the cup and platter I noticed that my legs were fastened so loosely that I could slip them out in a moment.

The dusk had fallen, and the mist risen, so that the whole party were enveloped in gloom, and I heard the Captain say to the men, who were sitting at a short distance from me:

"We've a long night ride, and I shan't halt again before dawn. You'd better snatch an hour's sleep."

I saw in a moment that the whole thing had been arranged cleverly for my escape, and that the Captain himself had told me in his insulting tone the road I must make for. I threw myself back and pretended to sleep, and the man on guard over me—a fat, heavy fellow, whom the fatigue of the ride had already worn out—first satisfied himself that I was as sound asleep as I was when we had halted previously, and then curled himself up to follow my example.

With the greatest care I drew my legs out of their bonds and sat up. The men were breathing heavily in deep slumber, while the fellow close to me was snoring

vigorously. I glanced around, and just above me on the road I should take was the Captain's horse tethered alone. He was by far the fleetest and best-blooded animal in the troop, and once on his back I could laugh at pursuit. That he had been left there was due to no accident, I was convinced; and stealthily, inch by inch, holding my breath in my excitement, I began to crawl toward him.

I reached him unnoticed, and, stroking his neck, I cast off the tether, and led him away for a few paces along the soft turf. All was dead silence in the little camp of sleepers, and in the murky mist I could see nothing of them and they could see nothing of me.

I led the horse until I reckoned to be out of earshot, and then mounted and set off at a canter, keeping on the turf as long as possible.

Suddenly a loud shout behind me from the men announced that the fact of my escape had been discovered, and, driving my heels into the horse's side, I dashed off at a rapid gallop for the road which Captain Wolasky had said was the road to Sofia. I found it without difficulty, of course, and paused a moment at the turning to listen for signs of pursuit.

I could hear nothing, but resolved to make the best of my start, and galloped off at a pace which showed the splendid quality of the animal under me.

CHAPTER XXVIII

A FEARSOME DILEMMA

As I plunged along in my wild ride through the quickly darkening gloom, I began to take stock of my position and shape some kind of plans. Beyond the statement that the lane would lead me to Sofia, I had not a notion of where I was, and the twists and turns of the road along which I was galloping madly soon caused me to lose all knowledge of the direction in which Sofia lay.

But this did not trouble me very much. I was mounted on a splendid animal; I was armed, for I found the Captain's revolver in the holster; and I had money in my pockets enough to more than serve any needs likely to arise.

I did not much fear any serious pursuit. The same timely friendship which had led Captain Wolasky to venture so much for me would, I was sure, suffice to induce him to lead the pursuit in any direction but that which he knew I should take; and after I had covered a few miles I halted and listened again for any sounds of followers. There was not a sound, and after that I determined to proceed leisurely, and so spare my horse for any effort should I stumble across any patrolling party of troops.

My wish was, of course, to push for the frontier; but, as the city lay between me and the west road, and as moreover I knew neither how to find a way round

the city, and thus avoid the risk of crossing it, nor my road to the frontier, should I ever be able to get through Sofia safely, I was much puzzled what course to take.

I could of course trust to the chance of being able to make inquiries as I went, but there was so much risk in such a course that I feared it. If I was to get through safely, I knew I must ride for the most part at night, because the daylight spelt a double danger to me. It was practically certain that the main road would be infested by Kolfort's men, and the chances of my being able to evade them all were infinitesimal.

Another scheme suggested itself to me—hazardous, no doubt—but possibly not so dangerous as the alternative. Markov had given me a plan of his route to the frontier, with a list of the places and persons where he had arranged for the relays of horses; but in the confusion and hurry of my departure from Sofia I had left this behind me. It was not of much consequence so long as he had been present to act as guide, but without him it had become of vital importance. My present idea was therefore to risk a return to my own house, get the paper, which was locked up in a secret cabinet in my library, and perhaps remain hidden in the house during the following day, setting out on my journey to the frontier when darkness came to help me.

The obstacle to the scheme was, of course, the possibility that my house might be in the possession of Kolfort's agents, and that I might run my head into a trap. But the house contained so many secret ways and passages that this risk was greatly lessened; and I reckoned that I could at least effect an entrance without being discovered, and if I found the project impossible

could leave it again. In any case, the possession of the plan of route was so essential to me under the circumstances that I made up my mind to run the risk of the venture.

I had first to find my way to the city, however, and in this I was singularly fortunate. I had ridden some three or four hours when the moon rose, and soon afterwards, to my intense satisfaction, my cross road came out at a point which I recognised as being some four or five miles from my house. I quickened my pace, therefore, riding very warily, and, wherever possible, cantering on the turf, until I came out on the heath which was close to the mouth of the underground passage leading under my grounds. I would not trust myself to use that because its secret was known to Kolfort's agents; but I chose a path which led me to another gate of the garden.

I dismounted there, unlocked the gate, drew my horse under the shadow of some trees, fastened him, and, thrusting the revolver into my belt for use in case of need, crept forward to reconnoitre the house.

Every window at the back was in darkness, even to the kitchens, and the place seemed empty and deserted. Keeping well within the shadow of the walls, I stole round with the utmost caution to the front, taking care that every footfall should be deadened by either the turf or the soft mould of the flower beds.

In the front there was a faint light from one window; a carriage stood in the roadway, and, near the gates opening from the drive, I saw one or two moving shadows of men.

The carriage surprised and startled me. Obviously someone was taking a keen interest in my concerns, and was inside the house; and I had to consider

whether I dared to venture any further with my plan in the face of such added danger. A minute's thought determined me to proceed, however. What I had feared was the presence of a fairly large number of men holding possession of the house ; but there was no sign of this, and if only one or two attendants were with this visitor, whoever it might be, they would not have an easy task to capture me, while I should not have a difficult one to avoid them.

At the side where I stood there was a small opening into a passage that led straight to my library, and, unlocking it very softly, I entered, and stole along it on tiptoe, feeling my way by the wall in the pitchy darkness. There were several doors leading off from the narrow passage to different parts of the house, and at each of these I stood and listened intently, venturing to unlock one or two of them with my master-key. In this way I was able to satisfy myself that not a soul was in the lower part of the house, and, assured by this knowledge, I crept up the stone staircase that led to the library.

The need for absolute silence on my part increased with every step, and when I reached the top I drew off my heaving riding boots and moved at a snail's pace, my stockinged feet making no noise whatever.

The entrance to the passage from the room had been masked very cleverly. It was formed by a revolving panel in the wall, which swung on well-oiled pivots and opened behind a sham cabinet, through the painted glass doors of which care had been taken to allow of anyone who stood in the cabinet both hearing and seeing all that went on in the room. I moved the panel inch by inch with infinite care and caution, and as I did so heard the sound of voices.

I started, and almost lost my presence of mind as I recognised the deep, gruff tone of General Kolfort, followed by the soft, dulcet, seductive laugh of the Countess Bokara. Passing noiselessly through the panel, I entered the cabinet, and the sight that met my eyes made me almost cry out in astonishment.

The wily old Russian had for once met more than his match. He was seated in a chair with his arms fastened behind the back of it, staring up, with leaden face and fear-filled eyes, into the face of the woman who stood over him with a long, deadly-looking dagger in her raised hand, passion and hate blazing in her eyes, and making the blade tremble in her grasp so that the light quivered and danced on the steel as the taunting, scoffing words flowed volubly from her lips.

"Yes, you are to die. I lured you here for the purpose—lured you, as you say, with lies about the secret proofs of this Count's guilt which I could put into your hands. A single movement, and my blade strikes home to its sheath in your treacherous old heart!"

The words came through her clenched teeth, and she looked a very she-devil as she gloated over her helpless and cowering victim. He might well cower, for if ever the lust for human blood was written on a human face, it was there in every line of hers.

"What do you want?" he asked at length.

"Nothing but revenge. Nothing but that you shall feel before you die some of the pain and horror you and your cursed agents and spies have made my Prince endure for months past; nothing but to know that at last our accounts are squared, and what you tried and failed to do with me I have tried and succeeded in doing with you; nothing but your life, murderer!"

"You can name your own terms," he said again; and

I saw him glance about him as if in desperate search of some faint hope of escape from the menacing knife. She saw the glance too, and laughed, a fiend's laugh, scornful, sneering, and utterly loathsome.

"You may look where you will, but you remember your own condition—alone in the house. Alone, that you might not be seen with me, or perhaps might trap me with more of your damnable treachery. Well, you've had your way, and we are alone ; but it's the trapper who is trapped, the spider who is caught in his own web. I'm glad you are afraid of death. I thought it would be so, you are so prompt and quick to order the deaths of others. And now you want to find proofs that will enable you to have this Englishman put out of your way, something to give a colour to your order for his removal ; and when your men had searched here and found nothing strong enough, you swallowed the bait I put to you, to guide you to the place where you should find all you wanted and more."

"He is no friend of yours."

"What is that to me? You are my enemy, and here helpless in my power. The great, powerful, ruthless, implacable enemy of my Prince and of Bulgaria here alone, fastened like a child to a chair by the hand of a woman. Where is your power now? Will it help you to unfasten even a strand of your bonds? Will it bring a single soul to your aid? Will it stay by a second the plunge of my knife, or turn by so much as a hair's breadth the point from your heart? Were you as feeble as the meanest and weakest of your victims, you could not be more helpless than alone here with me."

The bloodthirsty fury of this unsexed demon was a hateful sight. Had she plunged her knife into the

man's heart in a paroxysm of rage I could have understood the passion which impelled her to her act of revenge, but it was loathsome to see her standing gloating over the wretched, quivering old man. I made up my mind to stop her; and I was about to dash into the room to tear the knife from her grasp, for I could stand the sight no longer, when a thought inspired by his fear struck me. Like a flash of light a way to safety for me darted into my mind. If he was the coward at heart she had proved him I could turn his fears to good account, and in a moment I turned as anxious to save his life as I was to end the intolerable sight of her cruel, tigerish, callous gloating.

"You have tried to murder my Prince, and now you have dragged him from his throne to some of your vile Russian prisons," she began again, when I burst open the doors of my hiding-place, darted upon her before she could recover from her start of surprise, and, pushing her back, stood between her and the General.

"You!" she cried in a voice choking with baffled passion, and looking for all the world as though she would spring on me.

"Silence!" I said sternly. "This has gone on too long already. I will have no murder of this kind done here."

I heard the old man behind me give a deep sigh of relief, and, glancing round, I saw that his head had dropped back on his shoulders. He had fainted in the sudden relaxation of the terrible strain, and with his dead white face upturned, open-mouthed and staring-eyed, he looked like a corpse.

But I could give him no more than a glance, for I dared not keep my eyes from the wild woman before me.

"You know he came here to find proofs to justify him in ordering your death?"

"I heard you taunt him with it just now; but I can protect myself."

"I did not come to kill him for that."

"I care nothing for your motives; I will not have him killed here," I returned in the same stern, decisive tone.

She eyed me viciously, like a baulked tigress.

"You will not?" The words came in a low, strenuous, menacing voice that fitted with her tigress look.

"No, I will not;" and at that, without another word, she flung herself upon me, wrought up to such a pitch of madness in her reckless yearning to do the deed she had come to do upon Kolfort that she would have plunged the knife into my heart to clear me out of her path. She struggled with the strength and frenzy of madness, turning the knife as I clutched and held her wrist until it gashed my hand, while she strained every nerve and muscle of her lithe, active body in the desperate efforts to get past me and wrench her wrist from my grip.

She was now in all truth a madwoman.

It was a grim, fierce, gruesome struggle, for her strength was at all times far beyond that of a woman, and her mania increased it until I could scarce hold her in check. Had I been a less powerful man she would certainly have beaten me; but I thrust her away again, though I could not get the dagger from her, and was preparing myself for a renewal of the struggle, when, with a scream for help that resounded through the house, she turned her wild eyes on me, now gleaming with her madness, and hissed:

"He seeks the proofs to kill you! He shall have

them in my dead body ! My blood is on you ! My murder shall give him the proofs he needs ! ”

She cried again for help in the same ear-piercing screech ; and, before I could devise her meaning, she turned the blade against herself, plunged it into her own heart, and, with a last half-finished scream, fell to the floor with a sickening thud.

In an instant I saw the method in her madness. The General had seen me in the room ; he was now unconscious ; there was no witness of her self-murder ; my hand was streaming with the blood from the gashes of her knife ; it was in my house it happened ; her screams for help must have been heard outside. The suggestive proofs that I had slain her were enough to convince anyone of my guilt, and in another moment I should have the General's men thundering at the door, not only to stop my flight, but to have me denounced as a murderer.

Surely never was a man in a more desperate plight, and for the moment I knew not in my desperation what to do.

A glance at General Kolfort showed me he was still unconscious, and I rushed to him and shook him in the frenzy of my despair. But he gave no sign of returning consciousness, and the white face rolled from side to side as the head shook nervelessly on the limp, flaccid neck.

I clenched my hands and breathed hard in my concentrated efforts to think coherently and form some plan of action, and I cursed aloud in my wrath the fiend of a woman who had brought me to this pass of peril. I had no thought for her, dead though she was, but wild, raging, impotent hate.

Mere flight was no use. If I were charged with this

awful deed I should be proscribed as a murderer, and the charge would dog my footsteps wherever I went and rest on me always, till I should be dragged perhaps to a felon's death. These thoughts flashed like lightning through my mind in the seconds that followed, crazing, bewildering, and frightening me till the drops stood cold and thick on my brow and my hands grew clammy with the dew of fear.

Then came the sounds of men running on the gravel outside, and I listened to them in positively fascinated, helpless irresolution.

Another second and the men were knocking loudly at the house door; and still I could not move. My feet were chained by a palsy of fear to the floor, my breath came in gasps so that I was like to choke, and when the knocking was repeated I could do no more than turn and stare helplessly in the direction of the sound like a crazy idiot. My brain seemed to have stayed every function except to fill me with this awesome conviction of deadly inevitable peril.

The knocking was repeated for the third time, and I heard the voices of the men calling to be admitted. I felt that in a minute more the end must come, and still I could do nothing but stare in imbecile apathy and wait for it.

Never can I efface the horror of that terrible moment.

Then suddenly it seemed to pass. I thought clearly again, the instincts of self-preservation reasserted themselves, and I cursed myself for the invaluable time I had lost.

But it might not even now be too late.

CHAPTER XXIX

GENERAL KOLFORT TO THE RESCUE

AS I stood in a last second of desperate thought I heard the crash of glass, and I knew the men were breaking into the house ; and I knew, too, that another minute would see them in the room where I should be caught red-handed. The instant General Kolfort returned to consciousness he would be the first to denounce me, despite the fact that I had saved him from death. He would only too gladly use against me the awful proofs of my apparent guilt which the mad woman had afforded by her self-murder. It was just such a chance as he would welcome.

I dared not leave him behind me.

I seized him, and, tearing with the strength of passion at his bonds, tugged and wrenched until I freed his hands and lifted him in my arms. He was still faint, though I detected now the signs of returning consciousness. Then I extinguished the light, darted with him through the entrance into the secret passage, and, clapping a hand over his mouth that he should utter no sound when his senses came back, I drew my revolver, and peering through the glass into the dark room, stood at bay, resolved to sell my life dearly, whatever chanced.

But I had secured a magnificent hostage for ultimate freedom, could I only get through this mess. It would all turn on what happened when the General's men

entered the room, and I clenched my teeth as I stared into the darkness.

There was no long wait. I had barely hidden myself when someone knocked at the door of the room, paused for a reply, knocked again, and entered. Two men came in, the faint light from the hall beyond showing up their uniformed figures.

"This isn't the room; it's all in darkness," said one in a deep bass voice.

"Yes, it is; it's the library," said the other, who evidently knew the house. "Are you there, General? Did you call?"

They both waited for an answer, and, getting none, came further into the room.

"It can't be it," said the first speaker.

"Better get a light," returned the second. "I know it is the right room."

"Well, it's devilish odd." Fumbling in his pocket, he got a match, struck it and held it up, glancing round the room with the faint, flickering light held above his head,

"Here's a lamp," said his companion; "hot too, only just put out. I don't like this. Where can the General be?"

"Better mind what we're doing, Loixoff. The General won't thank us to come shoving our noses into his affairs."

"You heard the scream for help, Captain?"

"Yes, but it wasn't the General's voice," returned the Captain drily. "And he was alone with the woman we were to take prisoner afterwards."

They were lighting the lamp when this little unintentional revelation of old Kolfort's intended treachery to the Countess Bokara was made.

At that moment I felt my prisoner move, and I pressed my hand tightly over his mouth and held him in a grip that made my muscles like steel, lest he should struggle, and, by the noise, bring the men upon us.

When they had lighted the lamp they stood looking round them in hesitation. From where they stood the body of the dead woman was concealed by the table.

"The General's been here," said the man who had been addressed as Loixoff. "Here are his cap and gloves." They lay not far from the lamp. "What had we better do?"

My prisoner made another movement then and drew a deep breath through his nostrils, and I felt his arm begin to writhe in my grip. I slipped my revolver into my belt for a moment, lifted him up in my arms, holding him like a child, put his legs between mine while I pinioned him with my left arm so that he could not move hand or foot, and moved my right hand up to cover both nostrils and mouth. I would stifle his life out of him where he lay rather than let him betray me.

I could understand the men's hesitation. Old Kolfort was certain to resent any interference or prying on their part into his secrets, and they foresaw that the consequences to them might be serious if they were to do what he did not wish. He knew how to punish interlopers. They were afraid, and I began to hope that, after all, I should yet get out of this plight if I could only keep my prisoner quiet.

Even if I had to kill him I could still get the paper I had come for; and as no one would know of my visit to the house, no glint of suspicion would ever fall on me. At this thought I almost hoped he would die.

The two men stood in sore perplexity for a time that

seemed an hour to me, but may have been a couple of minutes, and then the elder one, the Captain, said :

" We'd better look through the other rooms."

" As you please," said his companion, and he turned away while the Captain picked up the lamp.

" I can't understand it," he muttered.

" Perhaps we'd better not try," said Loixoff. As he spoke he started, and I saw him stare at the spot where the Countess lay. " By God ! Captain, there's the woman, dead !"

They crossed the room together, and while the Captain held the lamp down close to the body Loixoff examined it.

" It's that fiend, Anna Bokara," he cried. " Now we know what that scream meant."

" Is she dead ?"

" Yes ; here's a knife thrust right through her heart. There's no pulse," he added after a pause. " Is this his work ?"

" It must be," returned the Captain ; and I saw them look meaningly into each other's eyes.

" We'd best clear out of this," said the Captain. " I suppose it's only a case of suicide after all," he added significantly.

" Probably," was Loixoff's dry answer as he rose from his knees. " Where's the General, do you think ?"

" I never think in these cases ;" and the Captain put the lamp down, taking care to find the exact spot where it had stood, and then extinguished it. " We'll wait till he calls us, Loixoff. And mind, not a word that we've been here. Leave the General to make his own plans."

They went out, closing the door softly behind them, and I heard them leave the house. As I pushed open the doors of the cabinet again their steps crunched on the gravel outside as they walked away down the drive.

I breathed freely once more. I was safe so far, and in the relief from the strain of the last few terrible minutes my muscles relaxed, and I leant against the wall with scarcely sufficient strength to prevent my companion from slipping out of my arms to the floor.

But there was still much to be done, and I made a vigorous effort to pull myself together. I relit the lamp, but placed it so that no gleam of the light could be seen through the windows. Then laying my prisoner, who had fainted again as the result of my rough treatment of him in the hiding-place, on a couch, I secured the paper of the route I was to take to the frontier.

Next I applied myself vigorously to restore him to consciousness. I dashed cold water in his face, and then, getting brandy from a cupboard in the room, I poured some down his throat, and bathed his forehead. The effect was soon apparent; his breathing became deeper and more regular, until with a deep-drawn sigh he opened his eyes and stared at me, at first in a maze of bewilderment, but gradually with gathering remembrance and recognition.

"You'll do now, General; but you've had a near shave. If I hadn't come in the nick of time that woman's knife would have been in your heart," I said.

He started, and terror dilated his pupils as he glanced wildly about him.

"You're safe from her. She's killed herself. Drink this;" and I gave him more brandy. As I handed it to him he started again and stared at the blood on my hand. He was still scared enough for my purposes.

He drank the brandy and it strengthened him, and presently he struggled and sat up.

I drew out my revolver, made a show of examining it to make sure that it was loaded, and put it back in my pocket. I had run my hands over him before to make certain that he had no weapon.

"What are you going to do?" he asked, with a glance of fresh terror.

"Not to use that unless you force me," I said, with a look which he could read easily enough. "As soon as you're ready to listen I've something to say."

He hid his face behind his trembling hands in such a condition of fright that I could have pitied him had it not been necessary for me to play on his fears. He sat like this in dead silence for some minutes, and I waited, thinking swiftly how to carry out the plan I had formed.

"What is it you want?" he asked at length.

"You came here to-night to meet the Countess Bokara in the belief that she could put into your hands such papers as would give you an excuse to have me put to death, and when she had done it you meant to have had her arrested. Instead of that you fell into her trap, and she was on the point of killing you when I interfered and saved your life. Then she turned on me and struggled to kill me in order that she might carry out her purpose. Her failure drove her insane, and in her frenzy of baulked revenge she plunged the knife into her own heart. You will therefore write out a statement of these facts while they are still fresh in your mind, sign it, and give it to me."

I pointed to my table, on which I had laid the writing materials in readiness. He was fast recovering his wits, if not his courage, and he listened intently as I

spoke. I saw a look of cunning pass over his face as he agreed to what I said, and crossed to the writing-table. He thought he could easily disown the statement, and had been quick to perceive the use he could make of the facts against me. But he did not know the further plan I had, and he wrote out a clear statement exactly as I had required.

"Seal it with your private seal," I said when he had signed it, his handwriting throughout having been purposely shaky. He would have demurred, but I soon convinced him I was in no mood to be fooled with. "Your seal can't be disowned as a forgery," I said pointedly. "And now, as your hand has recovered its steadiness, you can write this again—this time, if you please, so that no one can mistake it;" and while he did this I watched him closely to prevent a similar trick.

"Good!" I exclaimed when all was finished. The second paper he had written I folded up carefully and placed in my pocket; the first I laid inside the dress of the dead woman, in such a position that anyone finding the body must see the paper.

"That will explain what has happened when the body is found," I said drily. "I want the facts made very plain." He looked at me with an expression of hate and fear and cunning combined.

"I must go; I am not well," he said.

"We are going together, General," I returned quietly. "I am willing to assume that you are so grateful to me for having saved your life, that in turn you wish to secure my safety. You have had me arrested once, your men have treated me like a felon, you have filled the roads with your agents until I cannot take a step without further fear of instant capture, and up to this moment you have sought my life with tireless

energy ; but now you are so concerned for my safety, so eager to repair your mistaken estimate of me, and heedful for my welfare, that you are going to see me safe to the Servian frontier. That is the part you are cast for; and, listen to me, if you refuse, if you give so much as a sign or suggestion of treachery, if you don't play that part to the letter, I swear by all I hold sacred I'll scatter your brains with this pistol;" and I clapped it to his head till the cold steel pressed a ring on his temple. "Now what do you say?"

He cowered and shrank at my desperate words, and all the horror and fright of death with which the Countess Bokara had filled his soul came back upon him again as he stared helplessly up at me. His dry bloodless lips moved, but no sound passed them; he lifted his hands as if in entreaty, only to drop them again in feeble nervelessness; and he shook and trembled like one stricken with sudden ague.

"You value your life, I see, and you can earn it in the way I've said. So long as I am safe you will be safe, and not one second longer. That I swear. If there is danger on the road for me it is your making, and you shall taste of the risks you order so glibly for others. Every hazard that waits there for me will be one for you as well. You are dealing with a man you have rendered utterly reckless and desperate. Remember that. Now, do you agree?"

"Anything," he whispered, in so low a tone that I could only catch it with difficulty.

"Then we'll make a start. Come first with me." I led him upstairs to my dressing-room, and made him wait while I exchanged the uniform I was wearing for a civilian's dress, and shaved off my beard and moustache. He sat watching me in dead silence, his eyes



"THE COLD STEEL PRESSED A RING ON HIS TEMPLE."—Page 320.

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following my every action, much like a man spellbound and fascinated. I had saturated him through and through with fear of me, till his very brain was dizzy and dimmed with terror.

When my hasty preparations were finished, I took him down to the shooting-gallery while I armed myself with a stout sword-stick of the highest temper, testing the blade before him, and took a plentiful supply of ammunition for my revolver. I kept absolute silence the whole time, letting the looks which I now and again cast on him tell their own story of my implacable resolve. He was like a weak woman in his dread of me, and at every fierce glance of mine he started with a fresh access of terror.

When all was ready for my start, I drew the plan of my route from my pocket and studied it carefully.

"I am ready," I said; "and now mark me. You will call up one of your men. What is that Captain's name who is here with you?"

"Berschoff," he answered, like a child saying a lesson.

"You will call up Captain Berschoff and order him to draw off his men, and to send your carriage, unattended, mind, up to the front door. You will be careful that the Captain does not see me. When the carriage comes, you will order your coachman to drive you as fast as he can travel to the village of Kutscherf. While you are speaking to Captain Berschoff my hand will be on your shoulder and my revolver at your head, and if you dare to falter in so much as a word or syllable of what I have told you, that moment will be your last on earth. Come!"

I held my revolver in hand as we left the gallery and went to the door of the house.

My breath came quickly in my fast-growing excitement, for I knew that a moment would bring the crisis on the issue of which all would turn. When once I had got rid of his men, his sense of helplessness would be complete, and my task would be lighter. But my fear was that in his cunning he might even dare to play me false in the belief that I should be afraid to make my threat good. He knew as well as I that to shoot him right in front of his captain would be an act fraught with consummate peril for me.

My heart beat fast as I unfastened the heavy door, opened it, and turning gripped him by the shoulder as he went forward on to the step and called to Captain Berschoff.

Then I pulled him back, closed the door to within a couple of inches, and, planting my foot to prevent it being opened wider, I pressed the barrel of the pistol to his head, as we stood listening to the hurried footsteps of the approaching officer.

CHAPTER XXX

THE PUSH FOR THE FRONTIER

"DID you call, General?" asked the captain; and as the voice came through the door I tightened the grip on my prisoner and pressed the barrel of the revolver harder against his head.

He hesitated, and when no answer was given the question was repeated.

"Yes," said Kolfort, in an unsteady tone.

"Shall I come in? Is anything the matter?" and I felt the door pushed from the outside.

"No," in the same unsteady tone. "No, I—I do not need you. You will take your men back to my house and—and wait for instructions."

"And the prisoner, General? Shall we take her with us?"

"Tell him she has killed herself," I whispered.

"There is no prisoner to take, Captain Berschoff. She has—has taken her own life. Leave that to me. Withdraw your men and send my carriage up to the door here for me."

"Very good, General. Is that all?"

"Yes, that's all." The words came with a sigh of relief. I shut the door immediately, and we stood in the dark, near the window which the two officers had broken to get into the house, and listened as the captain walked quickly to the gates. Then came a word of command, followed by the scraping of the carriage

wheels on the drive, and the sounds of the soldiers' horses and the rattle of their accoutrements as they wheeled away along the road.

So far all was going well, and the crisis I feared had passed safely. The carriage drew up outside the door.

"Remember where to tell him to drive, Kutscherf," I said sternly. "You have half earned your life, but you must go through with it." I opened the door, linked my arm in his, and led him down the steps, and together we entered the carriage. He gave his order to the coachman through the window, and a moment later we started, turned out of the gates, and rattled along at a brave pace for the frontier.

General Kolfort fell back on the seat and pressed his hands to his face, as though dizzy and weak with the long tension of fear, and partly, I judged, ashamed of himself for his cowardice.

"You had better try to sleep, General," I said; "we have a long drive. I shall be on watch, and shall not need to disturb you unless we stumble across any of your troublesome patrols."

This was indeed my one source of fear now, and I leant back thinking how we should deal with them in the event of interference. The General's presence would probably make everything smooth enough, but there was always a chance that an opportunity would be given for him to try some trick to elude me.

We had at least sixty miles to drive, and as it was now past midnight I reckoned we could not reach the frontier until between seven and eight in the morning. It would be sunrise by five, and there would be thus at least two or three hours to drive in daylight. That would be the time of chief danger.

It was a bright, fine night, the moon had risen, and when we had cleared the town I resolved to urge the driver to quicken the pace of his horses. I let down the window, and the cool night air came rushing in and roused my companion, who sat up quickly.

"What is the matter?"

"Nothing; I wish your man to travel faster." I leant out and called to him:

"The General says you are to drive faster; at a gallop where possible." He did not hear me at first, and was for checking the horses, until I shouted the order to him again. I drew in my head, and was only just in the nick of time to avoid trouble.

The General had opened the door on his side and, in his desperation, was in the very act of springing out. I caught hold of him, dragged him back, and shut the door again. He fell in a heap huddled up at my feet.

"A very dangerous leap for a man of your age," I said drily. "I have probably saved your life, for the second time to-night," and I lifted him up on to the seat of the carriage again. "And now, understand me, if you had got out, I would have sprung out after you and shot you in the highway, had it cost me my life. I thought that you would understand by now that I'm in too dangerous a mood for you to fool with. But I'm glad of the hint you've given me, and I sha'n't forget it for the rest of the way."

He made no answer, but lay back on the seat as before, and I did not attempt to rouse him. The incident disquieted me, for it showed that he was dead set on outwitting me, and would do so if I relaxed for a single second the strain of his terror of my pistol.

The carriage was now travelling at a great pace, the man urging the horses to a gallop over every yard of

level road. We reached the first village without further incident, and I told the man where to get the change of horses. There was a little delay in rousing the people of the place, but once roused they set to work with a will, and in a very few minutes we were spinning on again with the fresh cattle at the same high speed for the next stage.

Markov had done his work shrewdly, and had planned the route so that for the greater part of the way we travelled without having to use the main road. But the by-ways were rough going in many places, and this retarded our progress. We made good time, however, and when we changed horses for the second, third, and fourth times without being stopped, my hopes began to rise fast that we might even reach the frontier unchallenged. We had covered over forty miles, and yet, including the time spent in changing horses, we had barely been four hours on the road.

A check came soon after the fourth change, however. We had to take to the main road, and had covered some two or three miles, when I heard a shout and felt the carriage checked suddenly.

"Who goes there?" called someone, and looking out I saw we were in the midst of a strong patrol.

"You'd better not stop us. I'm driving express. It's General Kolfort," came the coachman's voice.

I caught my breath, and my prisoner roused himself instantly and sat up. I passed my arm round him and, pressing the revolver against his ribs over his heart from behind, I said:

"You will tell these men to allow us to pass. My pistol is within an inch of your heart, and my finger on the trigger." I felt him shudder. "Let that window down, and call to them angrily. You know me."

He let it down, fumbling clumsily, so that with my disengaged hand I had to help him.

The non-commissioned officer in charge of the patrol had dismounted and came to the window.

"What do you mean by stopping me? Don't you know who I am, blockhead?" cried the General, his teeth chattering with chill and fright.

"My orders are imperative, to stop all travellers and see their papers," replied the man as he saluted.

"Well, you've stopped us; that's enough."

"I must see your papers, if you please," he said stolidly.

"Do you suppose the General writes passes for himself," I broke in.

"We have no papers," cried the General sharply. I saw his motive; he wished to provoke the man to stop us.

"Then you will have to alight," said the soldier.

"Very well. I suppose there's no help for it;" and as he turned to me the General's face wore an expression half defiant, half cunning. "I'm not responsible for what these blockheads do," he said.

"What papers do you want?" I asked, at a loss quite what to do in this new and perplexing turn.

"All travellers this way must carry a permit, or they are to be stopped. Those are my orders."

"But surely you know General Kolfort?"

"I must see the permit," he answered doggedly.

"That's easily managed. You can write one, General."

The man shook his head.

"They must be signed and countersigned," he returned, with growing suspicion and rising anger.

"The fellow's right," said the General, turning to

me with a laugh. "It's absurd, but he's right." His manner enraged me. He was trying all he dared to play into the man's hands.

"I am only obeying orders," said the sergeant; and for a moment it seemed as if between them I should be fooled. But I knew well enough what short work my prisoner would have made of such an interruption under other circumstances.

"Do you tell me you don't know that this is General Kolfort?" I asked very sternly.

"I am not here to study faces, sir, but to examine permits," was the blunt blockhead's answer.

"You can at least read, then? And I presume you know the General's handwriting. You shall have an order signed by the General, and one which will need no countersign to ensure its being obeyed. What's your name and regiment? Quick!" I said in a short tone of command.

"Max Pullschoff, sergeant, 3rd Regiment, 2nd Army Corps," he answered saluting.

"Now, General, order him to allow us to proceed at once at his peril. This fooling has gone far enough," and I enforced my words with a look of menace, while I pressed the revolver hard against his ribs, and added in a whisper, "Instantly!"

He hesitated just one instant, trying to nerve himself to defy me, but it was only for the instant.

"I am General Kolfort, and I order you at your peril to delay me no longer."

"I am very sorry, sir, but my orders are absolute. I can't do it."

"Write an order to Captain Berschoff that the rascal has mutinied against your authority, General, and that instantly on his return to quarters he is to be imprisoned

and flogged for mutiny. We will see then what he says about signatures," and I took out my pocket-book and gave it him with a pencil.

He glared at me viciously, but the revolver was his master, and he wrote out the order just as I had bade him, and signed it.

"Now, Sergeant Pullschoff, read that, and say whether in the face of it you venture to carry this thing further."

The man took it, and I saw his face turn deadly white as he read it and scanned the signature closely.

"I have done no more than my duty, General," he murmured; but I saw that I had beaten him, and I pressed that advantage home.

"If you detain us a minute longer, my man, you will go galloping back to Sofia in custody for that order to be executed. You and your men know perfectly well that this is General Kolfort, and that this is his carriage."

He stepped away from the carriage window, and I saw him consult with a couple of his men.

"If I break my orders you will hold me harmless, General?"

"Of course we shall. Tell him so, General."

"Yes," assented the latter, but very slowly and regretfully, for the new turn of the matter was all against his wishes.

"You can give me back that order," I said then. "And I shall make it my business to see that you are commended for your care in carrying out your instructions. Tell the coachman to drive on."

"Thank you, sir. I wish to do no more," said the fellow, saluting, as he handed me the paper, and then called to the driver to proceed.

"A very excellent soldier that, very wooden, but human at bottom in his fear for himself," I said quietly to my prisoner, as we passed the last of the patrols, who all saluted us.

"Curse you!" cried the General, in the bitterness of his chagrin and disappointment.

I laughed; I could afford to now that the danger was passed; and my satisfaction was the more genuine because the danger had been more serious than I had anticipated. Moreover, it suggested to me to take a precaution which I had neglected before starting.

When we drew up for the next change of horses I made my prisoner write me a formal permit to pass all patrols, as being on special service, and I pocketed it for use in case of need. The value of it I had an opportunity of testing within a few minutes, for we were stopped again by another patrol of troops. But I produced the permit this time, and it was accepted without a word of comment.

It was now daylight; and, as we drew near the frontier, my excitement increased. When we changed horses for the last time my spirits were as high as my companion's rage and chagrin were manifest.

In less than an hour I should be across the frontier if all went well; and all had gone so well that it would be a mere superfluity of cowardice to anticipate any serious obstacle now. We had left the main road, and had travelled some four miles through rough hilly cross lanes to the point where Markov had planned for the frontier to be crossed, when I found that the driver was in trouble with the horses. They were going very erratically, now jibbing and plunging in the harness, and again dashing forward at headlong speed. While they galloped I cared nothing, and, though we bumped

over the rough roads so violently that my companion could scarcely keep on his seat, and was constantly thrown against me, I was well contented, and laughed. The greater the speed the better it pleased me. But when they stopped, and plunged, and kicked with a violence quite beyond the man's power to control, I was anxious enough.

Then, quite suddenly, came an overwhelming disaster which ruined everything. We had ascended a steep hill at a slow pace, with more than one stoppage, and were descending a slope on the other side, when the horses bolted, and dashed away down it with a frantic fury that threatened to smash us up at almost every stride. The pace was mad enough to frighten a man whose nerves were in far better order than those of my fright-wrought prisoner, and his terror paralysed him.

There was going to be a smash; and I had scarcely time to realise the certainty of it, and to wonder vaguely how it would affect my escape, when it came. There were a few moments of mad, jolting, dizzying rush down the hill, then a fearful crash as the wheels struck against some heavy obstacle, a wild jerk that threw us both forward in a heap, a noise of smashing glass and rending woodwork, half-a-dozen great lurching bumps and jolts, and the carriage was on its side, dragging, and tearing, and grinding on the rough road, till it stopped, and I found myself lying in its ruins, with my hands and face badly cut and bruised, and every bone in my body, as it seemed, either broken or dislocated. I struggled out of the ruin as best I could, to find the driver and his horses in a heap in the road, the man himself in imminent peril of being kicked to death. I managed to haul him out of danger, and laid

him by the roadside unconscious from the effect of his fall, and left the horses to fight it out for themselves while I looked after General Kolfort.

He was also unconscious ; but whether from hurt or fear I could not tell. He lay pinned underneath the carriage, and I had great difficulty in releasing him. But I got him out, and set him beside the coachman, just as one of the horses succeeded in kicking himself free, struggled to his feet, and began backing and tugging to break the reins. I ran to him, patted and soothed him, and then, cutting the reins, I knotted them and fastened him to a tree. I meant him to carry me to the frontier on his back, and was glad to find, when I ran my hands over him, that he had no more serious hurts than a few surface cuts.

But I was in truth vastly puzzled how to act. To take the General with me any further was impossible ; yet to leave him behind might be infinitely dangerous. The instant he recovered consciousness he would set all his wits and malice to work to have me followed ; and my perplexity was vastly increased when I saw about a mile ahead of me a couple of horse-patrols appear on the crest of a hill, and come riding leisurely toward us.

There was no time for hesitation. I realised instantly the impossibility of holding the General in my power by means of threats in the presence of a couple of soldiers in broad daylight. There was infinitely less danger in trusting to flight.

I rushed to the horse, therefore, unfastened him, leapt on his bare back, and set off at a gallop to meet the approaching soldiers. As I glanced back I saw to my dismay that the General had been fooling me with a sham fainting fit, for he had risen to a sitting posture,

and was endeavouring to shake the coachman back to his senses.

At this I urged my horse forward, for I knew his next step would be to try and make the soldiers understand that I was to be stopped and secured.

As I galloped I made my plans. Getting within earshot, I called to them to hasten forward, for they had halted, and stood with their carbines ready to stop me.

Reining my horse up as best I could, I said, in a tone of command :

"General Kolfort has met with an accident there, and you are to hasten to his assistance instantly."

"One moment, if you please, sir. Have you your papers?" asked one of the men.

"Of course I have. I am riding on special service. Here is my permit;" and I showed it to him, not letting it out of my hands, however. He pushed his horse forward and read it.

"It seems all right," he said.

"Of course it's all right. I am on a matter of life or death, and have to press forward with all speed. I have had to use one of the carriage horses; but one of you had better give me yours. It is an urgent affair of State."

My tone of authority, added to the permit of urgency with the General's signature, impressed him considerably.

"It's all against orders," he said, hesitating.

"Do you suppose this won't justify everything?" I cried, shaking the General's order in his face. "You may find it awkward to refuse. The General will soon put you right. Quick! there's no time to lose;" and, to act my part thoroughly, I slipped off my horse.

He dismounted slowly, and half reluctantly ; but the instant his foot touched the ground, I let my horse loose, and, giving him a thrust in the ribs, sent him trotting down the road, while I seized the bridle of the other and swung into the saddle, before the man had recovered from his astonishment.

Then an exclamation from the second soldier attracted the attention of us both. There was good cause ; for, on looking back, I saw that three other horse-soldiers had joined the General, who was making frantic gesticulations to the men with me.

" Ah ! he sees me stopping, and wishes me to push on," I said.

" I think you had better ride back with us, if you please," said the soldier who had dismounted, and he made a sign to his companion, who was still barring my path, to stop me.

" Nonsense, he wishes me to push on."

" I can't let you proceed, sir, order or no order," he answered bluntly, and made as if to seize my horse's bridle, while he ordered his subordinate to prevent my passing.

At the same moment the men with the General fired their carbines to call our attention, and set off towards us at full gallop.

" At least you can wait till those men reach us," he said, and his tone and face showed his suspicions that something was wrong.

Thus in a moment the position had developed into one of fresh embarrassment and imminent peril for me.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE RUINED HUT

THE two soldiers mistook me vastly if they thought I was going to allow myself to be caught in this way like a rat in a trap, when the trap was a mile long, and the door of it guarded so loosely.

I had backed my horse to prevent the man on foot catching hold of the bridle-rein, and, wheeling round swiftly, I plunged my hand into my pocket, drew out my revolver, and, before the second soldier could guess my intention, I sent a bullet into his horse's head.

He dropped like a stone, sending his rider flying on to the road, his carbine, which he had levelled at me, going off in the air as he fell. The other made a rush at me, but I covered him with the pistol.

"How dare you try to stop me on State business?" I cried in a voice of thunder. "Another step and I'll blow your brains out."

He pulled up short enough at that, and I clapped my heels into the horse's flanks, and was off like the wind. He was a good beast, in excellent condition and very fresh, and more than fit to carry me the six miles which I reckoned lay between me and the frontier. The distance was so short that I had no need to spare him, and, as I had over three-quarters of a mile start, I did not doubt that I could win a race in which my safety and probably my life were the stakes.

I was in luck, too, for the soldier before dismounting

had thrust back his carbine into its leathern shoe, and in among his saddle-furniture I found a reserve supply of ammunition.

Turning in my saddle I saw that the three soldiers had passed the two with whom I had had the tussle, and were galloping after me at full speed, striving might and main to lessen the distance between us, and I knew, of course, that old Kolfort had given them his most imperative command to overtake and capture me at all costs.

But a few minutes of this hot work showed me that I was better mounted than they, and that I was gaining. They perceived this, too, and resorted to a tactic which gave me some uneasiness. One after another they began firing their carbines, not of course at me, for I was hopelessly out of range, but in the hope of attracting any other patrol parties who might chance to be in the neighbourhood.

This was by no means to my taste. It suggested that they knew there were more troops about, and while I dug my heels into my willing horse's sides, and urged him with my voice to still greater speed, I cast ahead many anxious looks.

A minute later, too, I was thrown into a state of much perplexity as to my road. About half a mile in front the road forked, and I did not know whether my way lay to the right or left, and had no time to consult the plan of route. It would have been fatal to hesitate, however, and I was going to leave my horse to settle the matter for himself, trusting that he might have been stabled somewhere near the frontier and would thus make for that point, when a very disquieting fact decided me.

A couple of troopers were riding at a quick trot along

the road to the left, and coming in my direction. They were at a considerable distance, and I should reach the junction long before them. I determined to trust to fortune and take the other road.

They soon caught sight of me, and as the men pursuing me kept up their fire, the two in front hustled their horses into a gallop, evidently thinking something was wrong, and intending to cut me off and stop me.

They saw me turn into the right road, checked their horses, leapt into the fields, and came galloping across to intercept me. This was not practicable, however, because the point for which they were making was nearer to me by the road than to them by the fields, and after they had galloped half across the fields they called to me to stop. Perceiving my advantage, my answer was to urge my horse forward, till he was straining every nerve and flying over the ground like the gallant beast he was.

Then one of them reined up suddenly, and being well within range, he sat as steady as a rock on his horse, levelled his piece, and fired. Fortunately for me he was quite as bad a marksman as the majority of such men are, and the bullet whistled harmlessly by me as I dashed past at the same headlong speed. His companion had, however, come much nearer, and when he found he could not intercept me, he too halted and fired after me in his turn,

He also missed me, but I felt my horse give a violent change in his stride, and immediately begin to slacken speed. I looked around anxiously and found, to my intense alarm and consternation, that he was wounded, and had gone dead lame on his off hind leg.

For the first time I was inclined to despair. Behind

me were five well-mounted men eagerly bent on my capture, and before me lay at least three miles of unknown road—even supposing that I was riding in the right direction—while my horse was already beginning to stagger in his stride. But my blood was up. I would not be taken alive, and I resolved to fight so long as I could lift a finger in self-defence.

Flight was now out of the question, however. Wounded as he was, my horse could not have carried me to the frontier had I been able to ease his pace, which was of course impossible. I could fight better on foot than on the back of a wounded horse, moreover, and I began to think desperately of my best course.

I drew out the trooper's carbine, put the ammunition into my pockets, and looked about for the most likely spot for a last stand. About half a mile ahead of me I spied a peasant's cottage half in ruins, lying a little distance from the lane. Just the place for me! I urged my horse to the last effort, and he answered gallantly, as if he understood how dire was my need. But he was reeling badly when we reached the spot I was heading for; and the two men behind raised a glad shout as they saw me pull up, slip from the horse, and make a dash, carbine in hand, for the cover of the ruined cottage.

They both fired at me as I ran, a cowardly act that filled me with rage. Hitherto I had tried to avoid shedding blood, but I sent that thought to the winds now as I sprang behind the shelter of the welcome walls and turned to settle accounts with them. Armed as I was, I believed I could for a time hold the place against a party twice as strong as that which was coming against me, and I was so mad in my rage and

disappointment, that I swore I would shoot without mercy any living soul that came within range.

The two soldiers came galloping up to the point where my horse had now fallen, and they stood chuckling at the successful shot which had wounded him.

I singled out one of them—the man who, as I thought, had fired the fatal shot—took deliberate aim, and fired. He dropped like a stone, and his companion turned instantly and scuttled back to meet the other three, who were now closing up fast. I smiled grimly as I thrust in another cartridge, and was turning to look for the next quarry when my heart gave another throb of dismay.

The place seemed alive with troops; and I saw another horseman coming from the opposite direction along the lane towards the cottage, and I did not doubt that he was the advance guard of a stronger patrol following behind.

The four men had halted out of range and were talking excitedly together, and I was thus at liberty to watch the newcomer, whose movements puzzled me considerably. When he heard the shot from my gun, and probably saw the smoke, instead of dashing forward to join the men threatening me, or falling back upon any party behind, he scuttled off the road and concealed himself in a small clump of trees, from which he seemed to be scanning the cottage where I lay. No trooper out on patrol would have acted so, and I concluded promptly that he was in some such condition as myself, and as eager as I to escape the attentions of the soldiers.

Could it be possible that he was a friend? The mere thought of such a chance in my desperate position filled me with excited pleasure, and, stepping for-

ward, I stood so that the sun's rays fell right on me as I faced him, and I waved my hand. I thought he made some motion with his hand in reply, but he stood in the shadow of the trees, and was too far off for me to see him clearly. Then I waved my hand again, beckoning him to come to me, and had time to do no more before the four soldiers began to move, and I had to step back under shelter and watch them.

Apparently they had resolved to make a dash for the cottage, in the endeavour to capture me with a rush. But they should never reach the place alive. I calculated that I should have time for two shots with the carbine and half-a-dozen more with my revolver, and if I could not empty the four saddles my hand and eye and nerve had lost their cunning indeed.

They crossed into the field, and seeing that there were no windows in the end of the building from which I could fire upon them, they kept out of range until they were in a line with the end, and then began their advance. A shrewd enough plan, had I been a fool to be caught unawares, or a coward afraid to expose myself to their rickety fire. But I was neither, and creeping out at the front I was in a position to take a kneeling shot at them before they started the advance. I don't think they even saw me, for there was a relic of what had once been a palisade projecting from the end of the house, which gave an excellent cover, and I waited till they were well within range before I fired. One of them fell forward, and I had reloaded and was taking careful aim for my second shot, when with a loud shout they pulled up hastily and made ready to fire in their turn.

I didn't give them time to shoot before I fired again, and again brought one of them out of his saddle. This

reduced the number to two, and neither of them had any relish for the business. They discharged their pieces at random, wheeled about suddenly, and galloped back faster than they had advanced. I had given them an excellent object-lesson in the value of good shooting, and I stood watching them in moody curiosity to see what they would do next.

Then I heard the sound of a galloping horse from the other end of the cottage, and when I ran back quickly to learn the cause I had indeed a joyful surprise. It was the horseman I had seen in the distance.

"Took you in the rear, Count," said a deep voice I knew so well; and the next instant Zoiloff and I stood hand-locked, his stern face aglow with pleasure and I with more delight in my heart than either words or eyes could tell. Never could a friend have been so welcome, and none more welcome than Zoiloff. I was so moved that I could not even find words to ask the news which I was burning to learn. He saw this, and said:

"All is well with the Princess. She is safe at Nish, waiting for you." I wrung his hand afresh in my delight.

"Never did beleaguered force hear better news," I said.

"The beleaguered force is doubled now," he answered, smiling. "Though I can't say it seems to need strengthening, judging by results. But now we had best be off, for the country between here and the frontier is like a rabbit-warren with the swarming troops. We shall probably have to hide, for we can't hold this place till nightfall, and I very much doubt if we can get through the pass in daylight."

"I have a permit that will carry us through," I said ;
"but I have no horse to carry it on."

"I'll soon mend that," he answered, and without a word he mounted again and set off at a gallop toward the two soldiers, who stood together holding the horses of their wounded comrades by the bridles. What followed was a gleam of farce in the tragedy that surrounded us. The men seeing him coming were instantly filled with alarm, for my work had told its tale well enough on their nerves, and after making a show of resistance and firing their carbines at him with scarcely a pretence of taking aim, they plunged their spurs into their animals and shot away trying to lead the other horses with them. But Zoiloff gained at every stride, and when he fired his revolver after them they cast off the led horses and themselves fled for their lives in sheer scatterbrained fright. He had no difficulty in capturing one of the horses, and came cantering back to me smiling and victorious.

"What rabbits," he said contemptuously.

"What a happy thought of yours," I replied, as I mounted, and we stole off, keeping the cottage between us and the still flying soldiers.

"Shall we make a dash for it and risk everything ; or shall we try and hide? Those curs will soon be after us with a larger pack in full cry, and we may find it difficult to hide."

"We'll push straight for the frontier," I answered, "and trust to old Kolfort's signature to get us through. The patrols seem to be in very small numbers, and if there's any trouble we can show fight. But now tell me what has happened, for I am on fire with impatience to hear everything."

"Happily there's little enough to tell, for by some

means we managed to escape all interference, and under your fellow Markov's guidance we reached the frontier without let or question. There was plenty of uneasiness after we left you as to whether we should be pursued; but thanks, I suppose, to your ruse, we were not followed, and the only trouble afterwards was in the frontier pass. It was only watched in the loosest manner in the world, and as Markov knew his business thoroughly he had us all past the look-out before they had even a suspicion of our presence. It was only a matter of a quick gallop then for a bit and we got through. I went on to Nish with the Princess, who was much fatigued of course, and it was at her urgent request, when you did not come yesterday, that I returned to see if I could hear any tidings of you. My uniform saved me from any trouble, and I was intending to go to Sofia, when I heard the firing and stopped to see what it meant. I saw you stand out in the sun glare just now, and though I could not definitely recognise you at such a distance I made a guess it was you, and rode up on the chance."

"You left the Princess well?"

"In all save her anxiety for you; and that we may hope to remove in a few hours now. But how have you fared?"

I told him the story, and he listened with many an approving smile and nod, looking stern and serious at the story of the Countess Bokara's suicide, and laughing at the trick I had served old Kolfort.

"After all that, we are not going to be stopped now," he said at the close; "although we shall have need of clear heads and perhaps quick hands before we are through. But we shall know soon. You see that narrow road climbing the hill yonder, with that small

station-house about half-way up. Well, the frontier line runs close ahead of that ;" and he pointed to the spot. "Hullo! who comes?" he added a minute later, as we turned a bend of the road and came upon two or three horse-soldiers.

We were riding at a brisk canter, and did not rein up until they challenged us. Seeing Zoiloff's uniform they saluted him, but the leader turned to me and asked for my permit.

"I am on special service," I said quietly, producing the permit. He read it, returned it to me, drew back for us to proceed, and we cantered on without having wasted a minute.

"You had your wits about you when you got that paper," said Zoiloff, laughing. "If those fellows had only known what that special service was, we should have had a brush with them. Let's hope that those at the barrier will be as easily satisfied."

"It's a nasty-looking road," said I, when we reached the foot of the long tortuous hill. "We'd better spare the cattle in case of a bother," and we pulled up to a walking pace. I scanned the station-house closely as we came in sight of it.

"I wish to Heaven it was night. We could steal up that path there," said Zoiloff, pointing to the right of the road. "That's how Markov managed it. It leads out again about twenty or thirty yards on this side of the station-house yonder, and we rattled through at a gallop."

"How many men are stationed there, do you think?"

"I couldn't see more than half-a-dozen or so all told this morning when I passed, and I stopped intentionally and chatted with the officer in command. But in a narrow place like this six men can do a lot."

"I see there's a telegraph-wire. I hope the General hasn't managed to send a message," I returned uneasily.

"I should think not, judging by the ease with which those men below there were satisfied. But I mean to get through. Once past the station-house, and we haven't more than two or three hundred yards to gallop before we're in Servia. But I confess I never thought of the telegraph," and Zoiloff shook his head.

"Well, we'll try the papers first and the pistols afterwards, in case of need. And they won't find it easy to stop us."

But as we drew closer I saw what Zoiloff meant about the ease with which a handful of resolute men could hold such a spot.

"They've turned out to receive us," he said, as we saw an officer posting men to block the road. "He won't attempt to stop me, I expect, and while you're showing him your permit I'll edge past and try to get the men out of their order so as to leave a gap for you to dash through. Then I'll follow you, and they may hesitate about firing on me."

"Very well; but we can't make much of a plan. Probably I may find it best to appear to yield at first and then wait for the moment to make the rush;" and with that we rode on slowly, watching the men ahead of us closely, but laughing and chatting together as though the last thought in our heads was of any chance of being stopped. And we were both laughing heartily as at some joke when the officer in command met Zoiloff with a salute and turned to address me.

"Your permit, sir, if you please," he said courteously, but as I thought with a glance of suspicion.

"Certainly," I replied, and I took it out and handed

it to him. As he read it Zoiloff pushed forward and entered into conversation with the men. There were only five of them, making six with the officer, as Zoiloff had said, and they were on foot. I saw him push his horse between the two at the end of the short line, and then as he chatted he coolly turned his horse broadside on the road, thus making a big gap. It was cleverly done, and he sat there saying something which made the men laugh.

"This mentions no name, sir," said the officer, looking up from the paper. "May I inquire your name?"

"Certainly. I am the Hon. Gerald Winthrop, an Englishman." The reply perplexed him.

"An Englishman? And on special service for General Kolfort? I don't wish to appear impertinent, but have you another name?"

"I am also a Roumanian Count—Count Benderoff."

"Ah!" His tone told me at once that he had had some instructions about me, and I began to prepare for emergencies. "I am placed in an awkward position, Count, but I'm afraid I cannot allow you to pass."

"My business is very urgent, lieutenant."

"The delay will probably be only a brief one. I am expecting a messenger from General Kolfort, and I thought you were probably from him. No doubt the moment he arrives you will be at liberty to proceed. But you'll understand my position."

"The consequences of stopping me may be serious."

"So may be those of allowing you to pass, Count. But in any case I have no alternative."

"But I have ridden straight from General Kolfort himself, who handed me the permit personally."

"My instructions have come over the wires, and within the last few minutes; and they are imperative not to allow you to pass until the General himself or those he is sending shall arrive. If you will dismount I will try to make the delay as little irksome as possible, though one's resources in a God-forsaken place like this are not abundant."

"Do you mean you wish to arrest me?" I asked quickly.

"Certainly not. You are at liberty to return if you please; my instructions are merely not to allow you to pass the frontier."

"Quiet, mare!" I called to my horse, which was fidgeting and plunging restlessly, as I touched her secretly with my heel, making it difficult for him to lay his hand on the bridle. Then I laughed as if the thing were a joke, and I gave Zoiloff a look. He understood it, and began to edge his horse so as to leave room for me to pass.

"It's very ridiculous," I said to the officer, who had drawn a little away from me, "but I suppose there's no help for it; and in any case I shall be glad of some breakfast."

"I shall be delighted to be your host," he replied, without a suspicion of my intention; and he called to one of the men to come and hold my horse.

This made the gap in their rank larger than ever; and, causing my horse to fidget and strain at the bit, I suddenly slackened the reins, plunged my heels into her flanks, and darted away up the hill as fast as she could gallop.

"Hallo! She's run away with him!" said Zoiloff; and he wheeled round and dashed after me.

It was some seconds before the officer realised how

we had fooled him. Then we heard the order given to fire after us, and the next instant the report of the guns rang out, echoing and re-echoing among the crags on either side of the narrow gorge.

The bullets whistled by me; and, glancing back, I saw that Zoiloff was following all right. A second volley was fired, but not until we had already passed the frontier; and I did not draw rein till I was nearly to the crest of the hill and within sight of the Servian station-house over the crest. Then I found that Zoiloff was not so close to me as he should have been, and I halted to wait for him. Below him I saw the officer and two of the men had mounted and were in hot pursuit.

Zoiloff was leaning forward curiously in the saddle, sitting very loosely, and his horse could hardly move. I rode back to him, filled with alarm.

He looked up as I neared, and I saw his face was bloodless. He tried to wave to me to go forward, but his hand fell listlessly.

"Are you wounded, friend?" I asked.

"No—at least not much. Go on!" he said, his voice weak and faint; and his horse was staggering so that I thought it would fall. Meanwhile the men behind were coming up quickly.

"Come on to my horse," I cried, my heart sick with pain and fear for him, as I rode to his side and tried to lift him off. But at that moment his horse went down heavily, and only with the greatest difficulty did I save Zoiloff from an ugly fall.

In a moment I dismounted. There was no time now to mount with him on my horse, so I laid him under cover of his own fallen animal and turned with bitter rage in my heart to check the men behind us, as

well as to revenge the hurt of my staunch friend, who had given himself to save me.

Snatching the carbine from my saddle, I knelt down, and, firing over the prone horse, I aimed at the foremost rider, who fell in a huddled mass on to his horse's shoulder and then dropped to the ground.

I was ramming home another cartridge as the other two halted and took aim. I crouched under shelter of the horse, and felt him quiver and kick feebly as one of the bullets plugged into him; and then the men came dashing forward again.

But not for many strides, for my second shot sent the officer toppling out of his saddle heavily to the rough road. I loaded again instantly, for the sight of Zoiloff's death-white face and the thought of his wound maddened me so that I could have killed a dozen men in cold blood to avenge him.

The remaining trooper had little stomach for any further fight, however, and he reined up and stood irresolute.

"Go back, if you care for your life," I called to him. "We are on Servian ground, and you have no right to pursue me." He was afraid for his own skin to come on, and yet afraid for duty's sake to turn back, and I saw him open his carbine at the breech to reload.

I did not give him time to do that, however, before I fired. I missed the man, but struck his weapon, shattering it in his hand. This was much more convincing than any words, and, recognising his unarmed helplessness, he wheeled his horse round and rode off back down the hill.

I had won; but what a price had the victory cost!

I bent over my wounded friend, my heart sick with my grief.

"Fly!" he whispered. Wounded sorely as he was, his thoughts were all for me and none for himself.

"There is no need, my dear friend. There's no one to follow us. Can you bear for me to lift you on to my horse? We're safe."

"I'm glad. I'm not hurt much," he whispered, trying to smile.

I lifted him in my arms, and, drawing my horse to a stone by the side of the road, managed to mount with him; and then, saving him all in my power from the jolting of the horse, I walked up the rest of the hill and over to the Servian station-house.

The men turned out to meet us.

"My friend is sorely wounded," said I.

"I heard the firing, but my orders are not to interfere," said the officer in command.

"The outrage was committed on Servian territory," I replied.

"I have strict orders not to cause any trouble with the Bulgarians just at present," he said, as if by way of apologetic explanation of his not having come to my aid. "We don't inquire too closely into what is done east of the station-house."

"Can you give me a place where my friend can rest?"

He looked uneasy at the question and hesitated.

"Can't he bear any further journey?"

"He is badly wounded, sir," I returned, with some indignation.

"I can do better than give him a bed here. My men shall carry him on a litter down to the village at the foot of the hill, where there is a priest who knows something of surgery, and he can get medical aid."

"As quick as you can, for God's sake!" I said.

Poor Zoiloff had fainted, and lay helpless in my arms, his head resting on my shoulder.

The men lifted him gently off the horse, the litter was brought out, and I helped to place him in it.

"I'm afraid I needn't ask for his papers," said the officer, as the men moved off.

I showed him my English passport, as clearing the way for me, and, with a mere glance at it, he returned it.

"I hope you will have better news than I fear of your friend," he said warmly.

I could not answer him; I was too broken with this new trouble. I followed the mournful little procession, and I am not ashamed to say that as I watched it and gazed at the white face in the litter my eyes were more than once half blinded by tears.

CHAPTER XXXII

"GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN"

DOWN in that lonely Servian village, nestling beautifully at the foot of a range of hills, a scene followed, inexpressibly sad and mournful to me.

We carried Zoiloff to the house of the priest, a man whose heart was as large as his means were straitened, and together we laid my poor friend on the low truckle bed in the barely furnished room. I helped while the examination of his wounds was made, watching the priest's face with an anxiety that cannot be put in words.

"How did it happen?" he whispered.

"A gunshot wound somewhere in the back, I fear," I told him.

But there was no need for this explanation, for the blood guided him to the wound easily enough.

"The ball has passed through his body and through his right lung."

"Is there any hope?" I asked, my own heart answering the question before it was asked. He shook his head sadly.

"On this earth none," he said. He stopped the bleeding, which was comparatively slight.

"There is very little blood," I said, hoping against hope.

"The bleeding is internal. No man can save him. I have done all that can be done. Let us pray for him."

He laid my friend back on the bed with a touch as deft and gentle as a woman's, and kneeling by the bedside, he began to pray earnestly and fervently, in a soft voice rich with the rare gem of unaffected sympathy. Following his example, I knelt on the other side of the bed, and, with my face buried in my hands, I tried to follow his prayers through the tumult of my thronging emotions at the knowledge that this brave, staunch friend must die, and that it was his friendship that had cost him his life.

How long the good priest prayed I know not, but after a time I was conscious that the rich, sweet voice had ceased, and when I looked up I was alone with my dying comrade.

I got up from my knees, and placing the one rush chair by the bed, sat down to watch for the end and wait lest he should return to consciousness.

A short time later the priest looked in and beckoned me.

"The men who carried your friend here are still waiting; shall I keep them any longer?" I placed my purse in his hands to give them what he would, merely asking him to reward them generously.

"Will he recover consciousness?" I asked.

"It were better not, but he is in God's hands," he answered reverently; and I stole back to my chair to resume my vigil.

He looked already like a dead man, and I had to hold my ear close to his mouth before I could catch the faintest sign of his breathing. I felt for the pulse and could detect no flicker of it, and then I laid my fingers gently over his heart. The beats were barely to be discerned. As I drew my hand away I came upon a secret. A dead flower bound by a wisp of faded

ribbon was fastened close to his heart, both flower and ribbon dabbled with his blood.

The sight of the little withered memorial of a dead passion, so wholly unexpected in one I had found so hard and stern, affected me deeply. I held it a moment, wondering what lay behind, and where and who was the woman whose heart would be stricken by the blow of his death even as sorely as mine would be. Then I laid it so that it rested on his faithful heart, and, taking his hand, sat with it in mine.

The hours passed uncounted by me. Once or twice the good priest came back to the room, and at length, when Zoiloff showed no sign of a return to consciousness, he administered the last rites of the Church. The sacrament was placed between the nerveless lips, and the priest and I joined in the solemn ceremonial.

"He will not last long. I am surprised he is still alive," he said, when the simple, beautiful ceremony was over. "God be merciful to him!"

When the priest left the room I followed and asked for some brandy, as I thought there might be some last message Zoiloff might wish to send by me, and I hoped to rouse a final flicker of strength for the purpose.

I poured a few drops into his mouth with a spoon, and after a few minutes gave him a second dose. I detected, as I thought, some signs of a rally of strength, and gave him more, and sat with his hand in mine and my eyes on his face and waited.

"Zoiloff, Zoiloff, my dear friend!" I called gently.

To my delight his eyelids quivered slightly, and after a moment or two they opened and he looked at me. He recognised me, and his mouth moved as if to smile, and I felt a slight, very slight, pressure of the

hand. I gave him more of the spirit, and it appeared to lend him a little strength.

His lips moved as if to speak and his eyes brightened.

I felt his hand move in mine as if he would lift it, and, guessing his wish, I lifted it to his heart so that the fingers could feel the little treasure of love that lay there. His fingers closed over it, and he smiled again. But his strength would not suffer him to hold his arm up, so I propped it up, that the hand might rest on the flower.

"Can you hear me, Zoiloff? Do you know me?"

His lips moved and his eyes seemed to assent.

"Can I carry any message for you?" and I laid my fingers on the dead flower to show my meaning, and then bent my ear down to his mouth.

He seemed to make a great effort to speak, and I caught a struggling of the breath, as I held my own in the eager strain to listen. But finding he could not speak I gave him a few drops more of the brandy, now convinced that he wished to say something.

"Have you any message, dear friend?" I asked again, as I bent down.

There came another pause of effort and then I caught a word.

"Christina's," and I felt the fingers near his heart close on the flower.

In an instant the full knowledge of his heroic sacrifice rushed upon me. He loved Christina; and in the nobleness of his self-denying love he had given his life that mine should be saved for her.

I grasped his other hand and held it, as I pressed my lips to his marble forehead.

Then I saw his lips move again.

"Leave it," and the movement of his fingers near his heart told me what he meant.

"On my honour, Zoiloff," I said earnestly. "God bless you! the staunchest friend man ever had. I never dreamt of this."

"Don't tell her," he whispered, trying to shake his head. Then I felt his hand try to lift mine, and, divining his wish, I laid mine to his lips, and he kissed it. This effort exhausted the little reserve of strength, and with a sigh his eyes closed, and his hand slipped utterly nerveless and flaccid from mine.

I thought he was gone; but he was not, and when I held a glass to his lips there was a faint dulling with his breath. Taking his hand again in mine, I waited for the end.

He lingered perhaps an hour longer till the twilight began to gloom the little chamber, and I was hoping that he would pass away in this peaceful slumber of unconsciousness, when I heard his breath strengthen suddenly. He opened his eyes; the fingers on the flower at his heart tightened into almost a firm clasp; a quiver shook his body, and raising his head slightly from the pillow, he cried in a voice strong enough to surprise and for an instant give me hope:

"Christina, Chris——" The word was not finished before the spasm of strength was spent, and he fell back again with a deep sigh.

He was dead; and I thank God that in the last struggle of his strong brave soul to escape he had been comforted by the love which had controlled and impelled every act and motive of his life, and which he had carried locked away from the knowledge of all the world in the deepest recess of his loyal, noble heart.

If I had treasured him as a friend in his life, I loved

him in his self-denying death ; and when I had satisfied myself that he had really passed, I flung myself on my knees by his bier and wept like a woman.

The room was dark when I rose from my uncontrollable passion of grief, and I pressed my lips to his cold forehead before I drew the sheet over the dead face and left the room.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE END

IT was with a heavy heart that I mounted my horse and, accompanied by a guide whom the priest found for me, set out that night for the railway station to take the train to Nish. Even the thought that the morrow would see me with Christina could not at first relieve the gloom of my sorrow or take from my eyes the picture of the cold still form of my dead friend, lying in the sombre bare room in the priest's house. I had left him full instructions for sending on the body to Nish, and had given him a sum of money which made him glad with the thought of all the charities he could dispense among the poor of the village.

But youth is youth and love is love, and as the miles passed which brought me nearer to Christina the drear mournfulness of my grief for the dead began to lose its blackness beneath the glamour of my love for the living. It was a sad tale I had to carry her after all, and though in obedience to my comrade's dying wish I could tell her nothing of his love for her, I knew how she would mourn his loss. But love is selfish; and when at length I reached Nish my heart was beating fast with the throbbing of the delicious, delirious knowledge that we were close together again, with no obstacle to bar the mutual avowal of our passion, and no need to dread another parting.

It was far too late when I arrived for me to seek her

that night, and I myself was so spent with my experiences of the last thirty hours that I was glad to throw myself on a bed. Excited though I was, I slept soundly for some hours, and did not awake until the sun had long been streaming into my room.

I hurried, of course, to the British Consul for tidings of Christina. He told me she was staying in his house, and, at my request, sent at once to tell her I had arrived.

"There is great news this morning, Mr. Winthrop," he said; "news that will interest you as much as it has me. The Russian plot has failed. Thanks largely to my colleague, the English Consul at Philippopoli, General Mountkoroff has declared for the Prince, and he is even at this minute marching on Sofia with the flower of the Bulgarian army against the traitors who sold themselves to this Kolfort and Russia."

"Will the Prince return then?"

"Assuredly he will. The Powers will stand behind Mountkoroff, and Russia will not venture to resist."

"Then my friend Lieutenant Spernow will be safe," I said, describing briefly the plight in which I had left him.

"You need not have a moment's uneasiness. Russian influence for the moment will decline to zero, and the Prince's friends will be paramount."

"Will you telegraph at once for news of him?"

"Willingly;" and he went at once to give his instructions. The result was all I could have wished, and later in the day telegrams arrived from Spernow himself, saying that both he and Mademoiselle Broumoff were safe.

"The Princess Christina is ready to receive you," he

said when he came back. "Will you come with me?"

I followed him with heart beating high, and, as if he understood how matters were, he opened the door of a room and stood back for me to enter alone.

She had been eagerly watching for my coming, but, thinking that perhaps the Consul would be with me, she had put a strong restraint upon herself, and stood waiting in an attitude of reserve. But the colour mantling her cheeks, and the bright glow in her eyes, told me her feelings, and as soon as she saw me enter by myself she ran to meet me, and with a glad cry threw herself into my arms with the utter self-abandonment of love.

It was no moment for speech, and many minutes passed with nothing more than an exclamation or two of delight or a few softly breathed words of passion. All thoughts of the dangers passed, the anxieties still present, even of my poor dead friend, were lost, and merged in the ecstasy of holding in my arms the woman I loved beyond all else on earth, looking into her eyes glowing with love for me, hearing my name whispered in her moving voice, and feeling her lips pressed to mine. It was a moment of love rapture, and so untellable in any language but that which love itself speaks.

When at length we drew apart, the first wild rush of excitement past, and sat handlocked to talk, I saw how anxiety and suspense had paled her, and how deeply she had suffered.

She listened intently to the story of my experiences since we had parted; and the ebbing and flowing colour, the passing light and shadow in her eyes, and the quick catches in her breath told of varied feelings

which the recital roused. When I came to the sad story of poor gallant Zoiloff's wound and death, she was moved to tears of deep and tender regret. But we were lovers and but just reunited, and the interchange of sympathies and mutual comfort in this our first sorrow in common served to awake a fresh chord in the rhythmic harmony of our love.

For her friend, Mademoiselle Broumoff, she was still full of tender concern, and it was a cause of rare happiness that, while we were still together—for the interview lasted some hours—the news came over the wires telling us that she and Spernow were safe, and coming post haste to join us at Nish.

There was but one shadow, besides Zoiloff's death, that hovered in the background. The question whether she would feel it her duty to return to Sofia. I asked her with some dread.

"I have been thinking of it while we talked, and since you told me of the turn which matters have taken," she said, her voice low and anxious, as if she were undecided.

I remembered my despatch to the Foreign Office urging that support should be given to her. But it was not in my power to wish that she should go; for I knew that it might still mean the breaking asunder of our paths in life.

"What do you think, Gerald?"

"I cannot think on such a subject, I can only fear," I replied in a tone as low and tense as her own. "I might lose you then."

"Shall the woman or the Princess answer it?" she asked, her face all womanly with the light of love.

"The lover, Christina," I whispered.

"Then it is answered: my place is here," she said

softly. "The woman is stronger than the Princess where you are concerned, Gerald ; or should I say weaker?" she added, smiling up to me.

"We will leave it soon for the wife to decide the term," said I, and the answer brought a vivid blush to her face. But it pleased her, for she sighed happily as she let her head sink contentedly on my shoulder.

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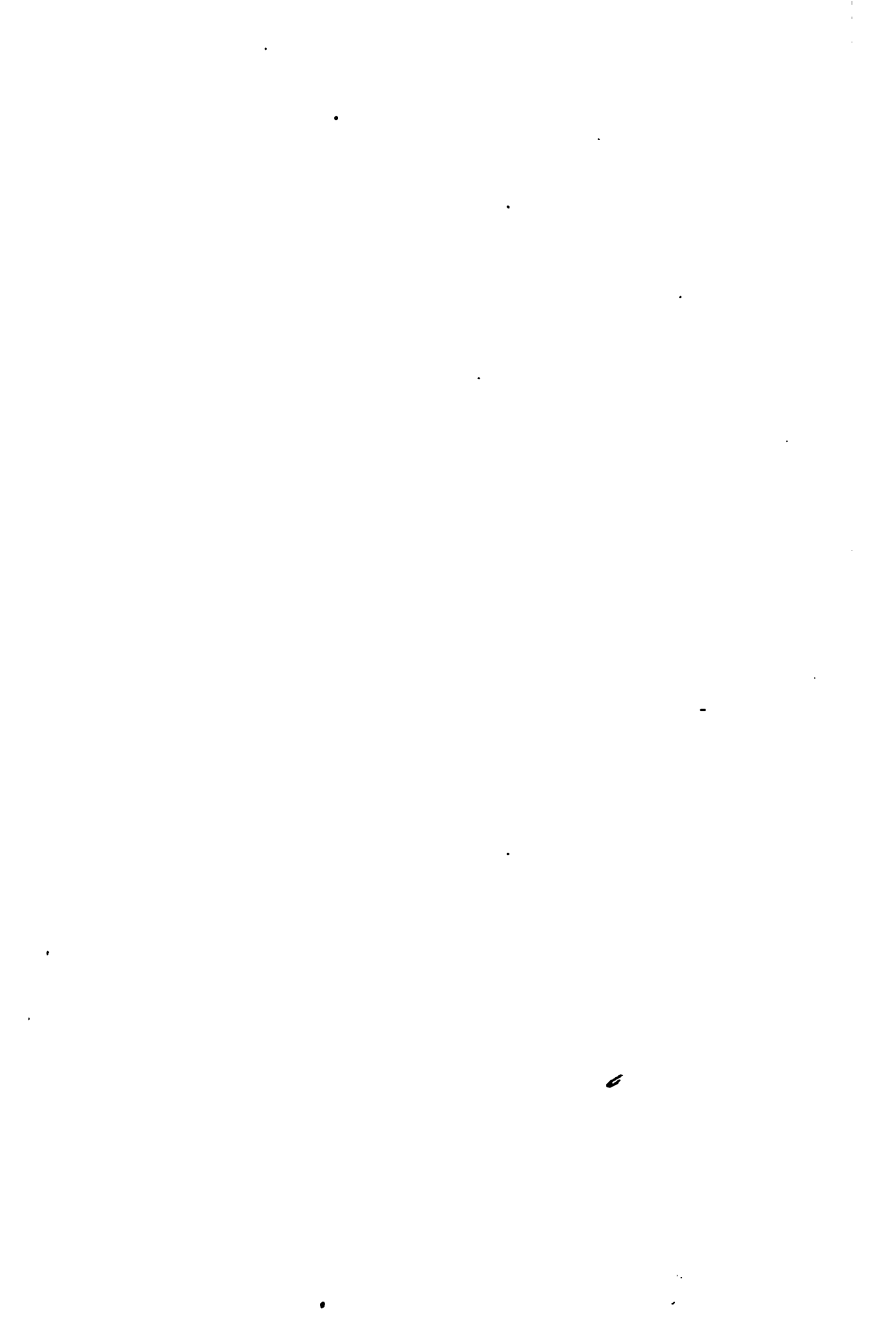
It is six years since the stirring events happened of which I have just written, sitting at my study table in my lovely English home. As I lay the pen down and close my eyes in reverie two memory pictures come before me. The one black-edged with the gloom of sorrow and death, the other radiant with the glowing promise of since realised happiness.

In that far away Servian town the bearers have just set down a coffin by the side of a freshly-dug grave. The priest is reading the funeral service ; the white-robed choristers cluster near him ; Spernow and I stand side by side at the foot of the grave listening to the words as they fall in rhythmic chant from the priest's lips, and thinking of the gallant comrade whose bones are being lowered to their last resting-place, and I of the strange secret of his hopeless, noble, self-denying love that is being buried with him. The final moment comes. The sturdy bearers lift the coffin and lower it, and pull up the ropes with a rasp that sounds like the severing of all hope ; the earth is cast down by the priest and falls clattering on the lid, and the service goes on to its melancholy finish. The priest pronounces the last words of prayer and blessing ; stands a moment with covered face in silent prayer, and then turns away, followed by the little choir. Spernow and I move forward to take the last look at the coffin—a

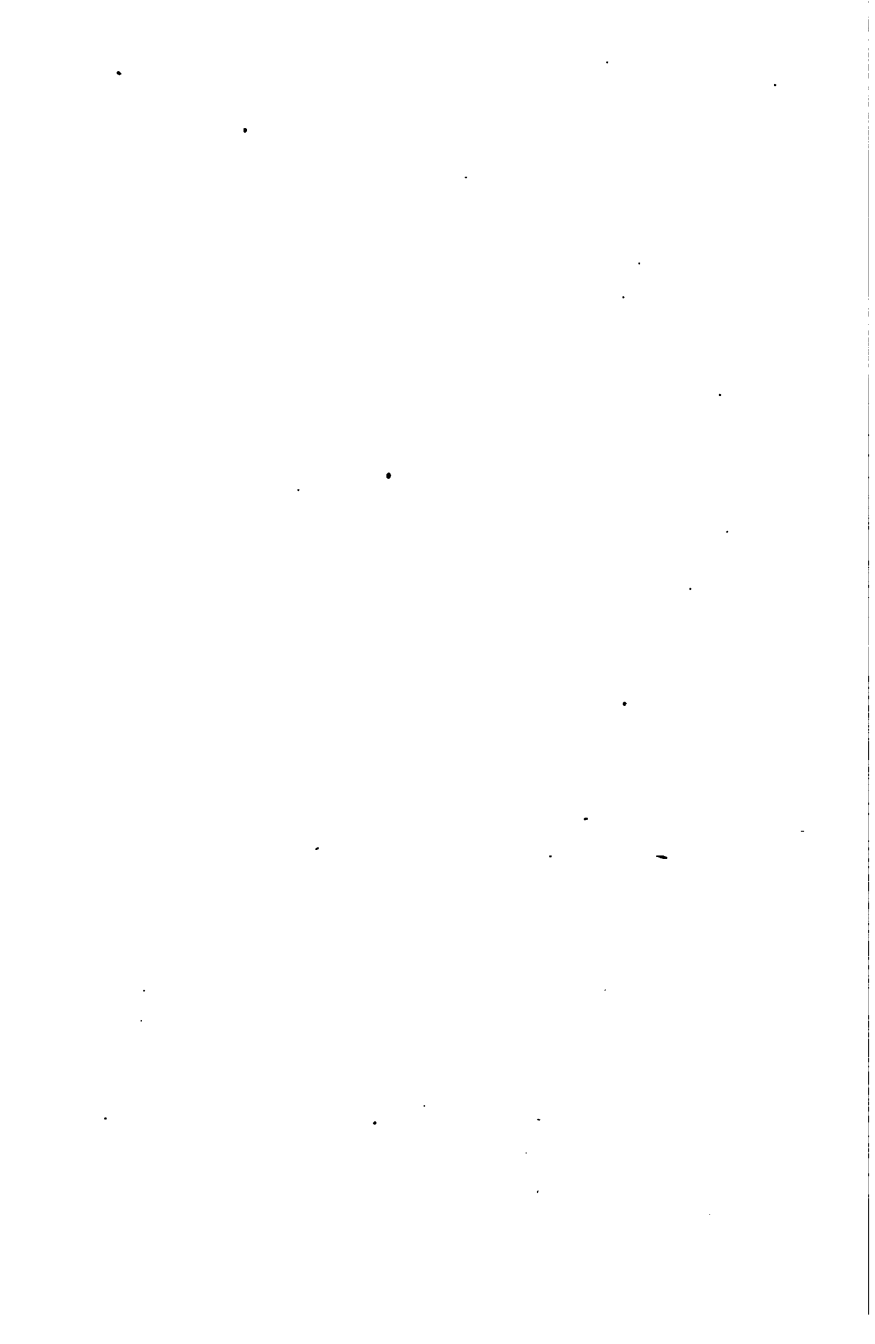
long, lingering, memory-fraught look—and when we in our turn move sadly away and our eyes meet, I see that my companion's are wet with tears. Poor, brave, noble Zoiloff, lying in that far away lonely grave!

In the other picture Spernow and I are again among the chief figures, but not alone now. Nathalie is by his side, Christina by mine. Again there is the same priest and the same choir, but we stand in the lofty chancel of a stately church, and the words are not of death but of marriage. Around us a small group is gathered, well-wishers, relatives, and friends, with faces bright with gladness and tongues eager to burst out with noisy congratulations and fervent wishes for our happiness. And when the blessing has been given, and we lead our brides down the aisle, the mighty building resounds with the pealing notes of the organ, and we leave the church through groups of curiously garbed men and women.

And at that point my reverie is broken by sounds of children's prattle. I look out on to the sunlit lawn to where Christina is kneeling and listening with a smile to the cheery chatter of our two children. All is warmth, peace, love, and rest in my English life now; and, as I glance at my dear ones, I thank Heaven with fervent gratitude that they are not destined to aspire to the dangerous splendour and evanescent glory of a minor Throne. I get up quietly, and stepping through the window into the sunlight, am hailed with a cry and rush of delight from my little darlings and a welcome of love light from the eyes of my beautiful wife.







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